Supreme Court, U.S.
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No. 03-

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IN THE

Supreme Court of the United States

AURORA NATIONAL LIFE ASSURANCE COMPANY AND NEW CALIFORNIA LIFE HOLDINGS, INC.,

Petitioners,

v.

SIERRA NATIONAL INSURANCE HOLDINGS, INC. AND GEORGIA LEE, AS RECEIVER FOR SIERRA NATIONAL INSURANCE HOLDINGS, INC.,

Respondents.

Petition for a Writ of Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit

PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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QUESTION PRESENTED

Whether the Ninth Circuit exceeded its judicial power, in violation of fundamental principles of separation of powers and this Court's decision in *Vermont Agency of Natural Resources* v. *United States ex rel. Stevens*, 529 U.S. 765 (2000), and in conflict with two other circuit courts, by reaching the substantive issue raised in a proper collateral order appeal while expressly refusing to address the threshold issue of whether it and the district court had Article III jurisdiction over the case?

PARTIES TO THE PROCEEDING

In addition to the named parties to this proceeding, other defendants below include Credit Lyonnais S.A., Altus Finance S.A., CDR Enterprises, MAAF Assurances, MAAF Vie S.A., Omnium Geneve S.A., Consortium de Realisation S.A., Francois Pinault, Jean-Claude Seys, Jean-Francois Henin, Jean Irigoin, Artemis S.A., Artemis Finance S.N.C., and Artemis America.

RULE 29.6 STATEMENT

Pursuant to Rule 29.6 of the Rules of this Court, Petitioners Aurora National Life Assurance Company ("Aurora") and New California Life Holdings, Inc. ("New California") state that New California is the holding company of Aurora. The stock of New California is owned by Aurora S.A. through a voting trust (67%) and SunAmerica Inc. (33%). Neither Aurora S.A. nor SunAmerica Inc. is publicly held. Aurora S.A. is a subsidiary of Artemis S.A., which is not publicly held. SunAmerica Inc. is a subsidiary of American International Group, Inc., which is publicly held.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
QUESTION PRESENTED	i
PARTIES TO THE PROCEEDING	ii
RULE 29.6 STATEMENT	ii
TABLE OF AUTHORITIES	v
OPINIONS BELOW	1
JURISDICTION	2
CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISION INVOLVED	2
STATEMENT OF THE CASE	2
REASONS FOR GRANTING THE PETITION	7
I. THE DECISION BELOW EXPRESSLY AND SQUARELY CONFLICTS WITH A DECISION OF THIS COURT	8
II. THE DECISION BELOW EXPRESSLY AND SQUARELY CONFLICTS WITH DECISIONS OF BOTH THE SECOND AND TENTH CIRCUITS	11
III. THE RULING BELOW REFLECTS A FUNDAMENTAL MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE FEDERAL COURTS' LIMITED POWER TO HEAR CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	14
IV. THE DECISION BELOW PROVIDES AN APPROPRIATE VEHICLE FOR ADDRESSING THE QUESTION PRESENTED	19

TABLE OF CONTENTS – continued

Page

A. There Are No Questions Of Fact That Render This Case An Inappropriate Vehicle For Review By This Court Of The Question Presented 19

B. This Court Can Only Review The Question Presented By This Petition While The Case Is In Its Current Posture 22

C. The Panel's Unpublished Decision Is An Appropriate Vehicle For Supreme Court Review 22

CONCLUSION 23

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

CASES Page

Acierno v. *Mitchell*, 6 F.3d 970 (3d Cir. 1993)..... 17
Arizonians For Official English v. *Arizona*, 520 U.S. 43 (1997)..... 15
Bender v. *Williamsport Area Sch. Dist.*, 475 U.S. 534 (1986)..... 9, 16
Buckhannon Bd. & Care Home, Inc. v. *West Virginia Dep't of Health & Human Res.*, 532 U.S. 598 (2001)..... 23
Carter v. *United States*, 530 U.S. 255 (2000)..... 23
Catlin v. *United States*, 324 U.S. 229 (1945)..... 10
Children's Healthcare is a Legal Duty, Inc. v. *Deters*, 92 F.3d 1412 (6th Cir. 1996)..... 12
Cooper Indus., Inc. v. *Leatherman Tool Group, Inc.*, 532 U.S. 424 (2001)..... 22
Coopers & Lybrand v. *Livesay*, 437 U.S. 463 (1978)..... 9
Deckert v. *Independence Shares Corp.*, 311 U.S. 282 (1940)..... 16, 17
Della Penna v. *Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc.*, 902 P.2d 740 (Cal. 1995)..... 22
In re Executive Life Ins. Co., 32 Cal. App. 4th 344 (1995)..... 4
FW/PBS, Inc. v. *City of Dallas*, 493 U.S. 215 (1990)..... 16
Flast v. *Cohen*, 392 U.S. 83 (1968)..... 15
Gwaltney of Smithfield, Ltd. v. *Chesapeake Bay Found., Inc.*, 484 U.S. 49 (1987)..... 19
Ivy Club v. *Edwards*, 943 F.2d 270 (3d Cir. 1991)..... 18
Kemp v. *International Bus. Machs. Corp.*, 109 F.3d 708 (11th Cir. 1997)..... 18
Larsen v. *Senate of Pa.*, 152 F.3d 240 (3d Cir. 1998)..... 18

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES – continued

	Page
Low v. *Altus Fin. S.A.*, No. 99-CV-02829 (C.D. Cal. filed Feb. 19, 1999)	3, 4
Major League Baseball Players Ass'n v. *Garvey*, 532 U.S. 504 (2001)	23
Meredith v. *Oregon*, 321 F.3d 807 (9th Cir.), *amended by* 326 F.3d 1030 (9th Cir. 2003)	17
Merritt v. *Shuttle, Inc.*, 187 F.3d 263 (2d Cir. 1999)	11, 12, 13
Metropolitan Express Servs., Inc. v. *City of Kansas City, Mo.*, 23 F.3d 1367 (8th Cir. 1994)	20
Moniz v. *City of Fort Lauderdale*, 145 F.3d 1278 (11th Cir. 1998)	11, 13
In re Pacific Standard Life Ins. Co., 12 Cal. Rptr. 2d 50 (Cal. Ct. App. 1992)	6, 20, 21
Ruhrgas AG v. *Marathon Oil Co.*, 526 U.S. 574 (1999)	9
Sessions Tank Liners, Inc. v. *Joor Mfg., Inc.*, 17 F.3d 295 (9th Cir. 1994)	22
Steel Co. v. *Citizens for a Better Env't*, 523 U.S. 83 (1998)	8, 9, 11, 14
Summit Med. Assocs., P.C. v. *Pryor*, 180 F.3d 1326 (11th Cir. 1999)	11, 14
Swint v. *Chambers County Comm'n*, 514 U.S. 35 (1995)	13
Timpanogos Tribe v. *Conway*, 286 F.3d 1195 (10th Cir. 2002)	11, 12, 13
United States Nat'l Bank of Or. v. *Independent Ins. Agents of Am., Inc.*, 508 U.S. 439 (1993)	14
Vermont Agency of Natural Res. v. *United States ex rel. Stevens*, 529 U.S. 765 (2000)	*passim*
Warth v. *Seldin*, 422 U.S. 490 (1975)	20
Younger v. *Harris*, 401 U.S. 37 (1971)	17

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES – continued

STATUTES Page

28 U.S.C. § 1292(b) 18
Cal. Civ. Code § 47(b) 6

OTHER AUTHORITIES

Robert L. Stern et al., *Supreme Court Practice* (8th ed. 2002) 15
13A Charles Alan Wright et al., *Federal Practice and Procedure* (2d ed. 1984) 20
16 Charles Alan Wright et al., *Federal Practice and Procedure* (2d ed. 1996) 17

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Petition for a Writ of Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit

PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI

Petitioners Aurora National Life Assurance Company ("Aurora") and New California Life Holdings, Inc. ("New California") respectfully request that a writ of certiorari issue to review the judgment and opinion of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.

OPINIONS BELOW

The unpublished opinion of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit was issued on March 26, 2003, and is included in the Appendix at 1a-4a. The unpublished opinion of the United States District Court for the Central District of California was issued on December 18, 2001, and

is included in the Appendix at 5a-24a. An earlier decision of the district court issued on June 20, 2001, is included in the Appendix at 25a-57a.

JURISDICTION

The United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit issued its judgment and opinion on March 26, 2003. Petitioners' timely petition for rehearing was denied on May 6, 2003. Pet. App. 58a-59a. This Court has jurisdiction pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1254(1).

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISION INVOLVED

Article III, Section 2 of the United States Constitution provides:

> The judicial Power shall extend to . . . Cases . . . [and] Controversies . . .

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

This petition presents the question whether a court of appeals with appellate jurisdiction over a proper collateral order appeal must consider whether the federal courts have Article III jurisdiction over the case. The Court has held that it must, *Vermont Agency of Natural Resources* v. *United States ex rel. Stevens*, 529 U.S. 765, 771 (2000), as have the Second and Tenth Circuits. In conflict with these decisions, the Ninth Circuit held that it was "discretionary" whether to review the Article III issue of the plaintiff's standing and "decline[d]" to do so. Pet. App. 3a n.1. This fundamental question governing the proper steps for appellate decision making warrants this Court's review.

The plaintiff, Sierra National Insurance Holdings, Inc. ("Sierra"), was a disappointed bidder in the 1991-92 auction held by California Insurance Commissioner John Garamendi and the Superior Court for the County of Los Angeles

("Conservation Court") for the rehabilitation of the insolvent Executive Life Insurance Co. ("ELIC") and the sale of ELIC's junk bonds. Sierra alleges that certain defendants committed wrongs in acquiring assets from the ELIC estate during its insolvency proceedings. The Commissioner, who continues to serve as the Conservator for the ELIC estate, is suing for these same alleged wrongs. See *Low* v. *Altus Fin. S.A.*, No. 99-CV-02829 (C.D. Cal. filed Feb. 18, 1999) ("*Low*").

1. *ELIC Insolvency and Conservation Proceedings.* During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the junk bond market declined precipitously. Due to ELIC's ownership of one of the largest and most default-ridden portfolios of junk bonds of any financial institution in the world, it became massively insolvent. The value of ELIC's liabilities exceeded the value of its assets by several billion dollars. As a result, the Commissioner assumed control of ELIC in April 1991, and placed it into conservation proceedings before the Conservation Court. That court named the Commissioner conservator of the ELIC estate.

The Commissioner conducted an auction of ELIC's junk bond portfolio and the rehabilitation of its insurance business over a number of months. One of the eight bidders was Sierra, a recently formed insurance company shell that never issued a single policy or conducted any business. Sierra's lead investors were Warren Hellman and Sam Zell, two of this country's wealthiest individuals. From the eight resulting bids, the Commissioner selected the bid of Altus/MAAF, a consortium of foreign insurers and investment firms. The day after the Commissioner's announcement, Warren Hellman stated publicly that "the Altus bid was an even better bid" than Sierra's. C.A. App. 119.[1]

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[1] C.A. App. refers to the Excerpts of Record filed in the Ninth Circuit.

Under the winning bid, (a) Altus would purchase ELIC's junk bonds, while (b) the insurance liabilities would be rehabilitated and assumed by a new junk bond free insurance company called Aurora, a California corporation. Aurora's shares would be owned by New California, a domestic holding company. The MAAF Group, comprised of foreign, private companies, would own New California's shares. This bid also provided that Aurora would infuse $300 million in new capital into the insurance company, and also would provide over $300 million in enhancements to ELIC policyholders who became Aurora policyholders.

The Conservation Court approved the Commissioner's selection of the Altus/MAAF bid, observing that it was the "highest and best bid received." C.A. App. 396 n.24. The California Court of Appeal also affirmed the approval. *In re Executive Life Ins. Co.*, 32 Cal. App. 4th 344 (1995). A majority of ELIC policyholders also supported the Commissioner's selection of the Altus/MAAF bid, and with good reason: Through its acceptance, ELIC's policyholders received 92% or more of their policy values, whereas most experts had predicted policyholders would receive approximately 75%. C.A. App. 126, 385. Over 70%, by dollar amount, of ELIC's policyholders accepted restructured insurance contracts from Aurora. Aurora's policyholders continue to receive over $ 5 billion in insurance and annuity coverage from Aurora.

2. The Commissioner's Suit: Low v. Altus Finance. In February 1999, the Commissioner filed suit against, among others, Altus and the MAAF Group in California Superior Court alleging fraud, conversion and unfair competition with respect to the ELIC rehabilitation. See *Low*, No. 99-CV-02829 (C.D. Cal. filed Feb. 18, 1999).[2] Specifically, the Commissioner alleges that, through a series of agreements,

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[2] Aurora and New California were not named as defendants in *Low* until the Commissioner filed his fourth complaint in February 2000.

Altus – which was majority owned by Credit Lyonnais, an arm of the French government – was really in control of the MAAF shareholders in their activities concerning New California. Although the Commissioner was well aware that Credit Lyonnais was a major player in the rehabilitation, the Commissioner alleges that Credit Lyonnais had a secret role that violated both California and federal statutes. The Commissioner maintains that had he known of the alleged secret relationship and agreements between Altus and the MAAF Group, he would not have selected the Altus/MAAF bid. The Commissioner seeks damages and restitution on behalf of former ELIC policyholders. Credit Lyonnais, a named defendant in *Low*, and another foreign defendant removed the Commissioner's suit to federal district court pursuant to the removal provisions of the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act ("FSIA"). All defendants concede the Commissioner's standing to pursue those claims.

3. *The Proceedings Below*. Sierra dissolved in April 1992, a few months after it lost the auction in late 1991.[3] Nevertheless, nearly nine years later, Sierra's court-appointed receiver sued Aurora and others for interference with business expectancy, RICO, and abuse of process, seeking $3.5 billion in damages, an amount greater than ten times Aurora's net worth.[4] Sierra's suit is based on the same allegations that form the basis of the Commissioner's suit: that Altus/MAAF concealed the fact that a foreign bank and government would

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[3] Sierra's "Certificate of Dissolution Before Beginning Business," dated April 20, 1992, states: "1. The business for which the corporation was organized has not begun; 2. No part of the capital of the corporation has been paid; and 3. No shares of stock have been issued." C.A. App. 418.

[4] Sierra filed suit in California Superior Court. The action was timely removed to federal district court by Aurora under 28 U.S.C. § 1441(b) based on Sierra's federal RICO claims. This action was also timely removed by Credit Lyonnais, on behalf of itself and certain other foreign defendants, under the additional provision of 28 U.S.C. § 1441(d) based on the FSIA.

control Aurora's ultimate owners in alleged violation of federal and state law. Indeed, these allegations previously were raised unsuccessfully by Sierra and others during the 1991-93 conservation proceedings. C.A. App. 245, 325-27, 670. Despite these allegations, the Insurance Commissioner selected the Altus/MAAF bid, the Conservation Court approved the sale after a 13-day trial, and Aurora was granted an insurance license.

Aurora moved to dismiss Sierra's Complaint on many grounds, including that Sierra lacked standing under Article III and California law to bring this suit, and that Aurora is immune from suit under California's broad immunity for judicial and other proceedings, Cal. Civ. Code § 47(b). Aurora argued that Sierra does not have standing to bring this suit because under California law, no legally protected interest can be predicated on an asserted injury as a disappointed bidder in a conservation proceeding. Aurora relied on *In re Pacific Standard Life Ins. Co.*, 12 Cal. Rptr. 2d 50, 53 (Cal. Ct. App. 1992), in which the state appellate court specifically held that a disappointed bidder to a conservation sale requiring court approval lacks a "legally cognizable interest," and therefore standing, even when it alleges it should and would have been the winning bidder in a proper bidding contest.

The district court dismissed all of Sierra's claims except the claim for intentional tortious interference. As to that claim, the district court concluded that (a) Sierra had standing because it alleged it would have been the winning bidder, and (b) Aurora was not immune from suit because the proceedings in the Conservation Court did not fall within the scope of § 47(b). The district court equated the issue of standing to bring a tortious interference claim and causation. Specifically, the district court "construe[d] the [standing] issue to be whether a disappointed bidder (Sierra) may maintain suit for lost profits against the successful bidder when the Commissioner had indicated a commitment to pick

one of the two – although the Rehabilitation Court was not bound to approve either bid." Pet. App. 42a. The district court dismissed the RICO claim, without leave to amend, for lack of standing. *Id.* at 18a-22a.

Aurora appealed to the Ninth Circuit. The panel held that the court had jurisdiction to hear the appeal under the collateral order doctrine because the district court denied a claim to immunity from suit. Pet. App. 3a ("A denial of a motion to dismiss would normally not be a final reviewable order, but a ruling denying a claim of immunity from suit . . . is immediately appealable under the collateral order doctrine.") The panel then affirmed the district court's order with respect to denying Aurora's claim to immunity under § 47(b). *Id.* at 4a.

The panel, however, declined to review the district court's order with respect to Sierra's standing. The panel acknowledged that this Court "happened" to address standing on a collateral order appeal in *Vermont Agency of Natural Resources* v. *United States ex rel. Stevens*, 529 U.S. 765 (2000), but concluded that "nothing in that opinion indicates that an appellate court *must* do so." Pet. App. 3a n.1 (emphasis in original). Thus, the panel held that in a collateral order appeal, it was "discretionary" whether the court of appeal must first resolve the question of Article III jurisdiction, and it therefore "decline[d] to address the question of Sierra's standing." *Id.* The panel further noted that "standing is potentially quite fact-dependant [sic] in this case and can be adequately addressed after a final decision is entered." *Id.*

REASONS FOR GRANTING THE PETITION

The decision below contravenes this Court's decision in *Vermont Agency*, 529 U.S. at 771. It also expressly and squarely conflicts with two other circuits' holdings on the question whether federal courts of appeals are obliged to

consider, at the threshold of a proper collateral order appeal, whether the federal courts have Article III jurisdiction over the case. Indeed, the conflict is deeper because circuit courts addressing other kinds of interlocutory appeals – including 28 U.S.C. § 1292(a) appeals of injunction orders and § 1292(b) certifications – also have held that Article III jurisdiction issues must be addressed as a threshold matter. By deciding a substantive issue without first addressing a challenge to the federal courts' Article III power to hear the case, the Ninth Circuit exceeded the federal courts' limited power to hear cases and controversies, rather than decide hypothetical issues.

I. THE DECISION BELOW EXPRESSLY AND SQUARELY CONFLICTS WITH A DECISION OF THIS COURT.

Review by this Court is warranted because the Ninth Circuit's refusal to address Article III jurisdiction conflicts with this Court's decision in *Vermont Agency*, 529 U.S. 765. In misinterpreting and misapplying *Vermont Agency*, the court of appeals necessarily disregarded the fundamental constitutional principle that a federal appeals court is required to establish that Article III jurisdiction exists in every case under review before examining any particular substantive issue.

It is firmly established in this Court's cases that "[o]n *every* writ of error or appeal" a federal appeals court must first establish the federal courts' Article III jurisdiction "as a threshold matter" before reaching any substantive issue. *Steel Co.* v. *Citizens for a Better Env't*, 523 U.S. 83, 94 (1998) (emphasis added and internal quotation marks omitted). As the Court explained, this obligation flows directly from the limited jurisdiction granted to federal courts by Article III of the United States Constitution: "The *requirement* that jurisdiction be established as a threshold matter 'spring[s] from the nature and limits of the judicial power of the United States' and is '*inflexible and without exception*.'" *Id.* at 94-95

(emphasis added) (quoting *Mansfield, C. & L.M. Ry.* v. *Swan*, 111 U.S. 379, 382 (1884)). Indeed, when federal appeals courts fail to satisfy themselves that Article III jurisdiction exists over a case, they carry themselves "beyond the bounds of authorized judicial action" and "thus offend[] fundamental principles of separation of powers." *Id.* at 94. See also *Bender* v. *Williamsport Area Sch. Dist.*, 475 U.S. 534, 541 (1986) ("Federal courts are not courts of general jurisdiction; they have only the power that is authorized by Article III of the Constitution . . . For that reason, *every federal appellate court has a special obligation to satisfy itself not only of its own jurisdiction, but also that of the lower courts in a cause under review*, even though the parties are prepared to concede it.") (internal quotation marks omitted) (emphasis added).[5]

Consistent with its command that Article III jurisdiction must be examined on "every writ of error or appeal," *Steel Co.*, 523 U.S. at 94, this Court applied that requirement to a collateral order appeal in *Vermont Agency*, 529 U.S. at 771. *Vermont Agency* is squarely on point here. The ruling under review in *Vermont Agency*, like the ruling at issue here, was the denial of a motion to dismiss based on a claim to immunity from suit. *Id.* at 770. As in this case, the immunity ruling was immediately appealable under the collateral order doctrine. *Id.* at 770 n.2.[6] Nonetheless, citing its decision in *Steel Co.*, 523 U.S. at 93-102, this Court "first address[ed] the jurisdictional question whether respondent . . . ha[d] *standing*

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[5] In *Ruhrgas AG* v. *Marathon Oil Co.*, 526 U.S. 574, 583 (1999), this Court reiterated that Article III "requires a federal court to satisfy itself of its jurisdiction over the subject matter before it considers the merits of a case."

[6] Under the collateral order doctrine, a decision that does not end litigation on the merits is nevertheless "appealable as a 'final decision' under § 1291" where it "conclusively determine[s] the disputed question, resolve[s] an important issue completely separate from the merits of the action, and [is] effectively unreviewable on appeal from a final judgment." *Coopers & Lybrand* v. *Livesay*, 437 U.S. 463, 468 (1978).

under Article III of the Constitution to maintain this suit." *Vermont Agency*, 529 U.S. at 771 (emphasis added). Thus, even though only the immunity *issue* satisfied the requirements for a collateral order appeal in *Vermont Agency*, the Court concluded that, once appellate jurisdiction attached, the principles set forth in *Steel Co.* and its predecessors required the Court to determine whether the *case* as a whole satisfied the "case or controversy" requirement of Article III before the Court examined the immunity issue.[7]

The panel below acknowledged *Vermont Agency*, but characterized the opinion as one in which this Court "happened to address the question of standing on interlocutory appeal" and asserted that "nothing in that opinion indicates that an appellate court *must* do so." Pet. App. 3a n.1 (emphasis in original); see also *id.* (ruling that the interlocutory nature of a collateral order appeal made it "discretionary" whether a court of appeals must first resolve the question of Article III jurisdiction).

The Ninth Circuit's characterization that *Vermont Agency* "happened to address the question of standing" without careful consideration of whether it had a duty to do so is plain error. First, in *Vermont Agency*, the Court *sua sponte* ordered the parties "to file supplemental briefs" on the standing issue after their regular briefing, which was complete, had not addressed standing. 528 U.S. 1015 (1999).

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[7] *Vermont Agency* does not open the floodgates to numerous appeals from denials of motions to dismiss on standing grounds. *Vermont Agency* leaves intact the general rule that "denial of a motion to dismiss, even when the motion is based upon jurisdictional grounds, is not immediately reviewable." *Catlin* v. *United States*, 324 U.S. 229, 236 (1945). Only when a court of appeals rules (as the Ninth Circuit did) that it properly has appellate jurisdiction by virtue of some other issue that is immediately appealable, must the court also address whether the federal courts have Article III jurisdiction over the underlying case.

Second, in the *Vermont Agency* opinion, in support of its threshold examination of standing, this Court cited its decision in *Steel Co.*, 523 U.S. at 93-102, which held that a federal appellate court has a duty to examine its Article III jurisdiction "*without exception*" on "*every* writ of error or appeal," and that this duty is based on the core separation of powers principles that underlie Article III. *Steel Co.*, 523 U.S. at 94-95 (emphasis added). Indeed, on the cited pages from *Steel Co.*, the Court went to great lengths to reject the position of the Ninth Circuit in that case that Article III jurisdiction need not be resolved first in every case. *Id.* By relying on *Steel Co.*, this Court in *Vermont Agency* left no doubt that a federal appellate court's mandatory obligation to examine Article III jurisdiction applies to a proper collateral order appeal. The Ninth Circuit's contrary ruling below plainly contravenes this Court's holding. This conflict warrants certiorari, or even summary reversal.

II. THE DECISION BELOW EXPRESSLY AND SQUARELY CONFLICTS WITH DECISIONS OF BOTH THE SECOND AND TENTH CIRCUITS.

The decision below also widens an inter-circuit split on the core jurisdictional issue. Both the Second and Tenth Circuits have recognized the obligation of federal courts of appeals to examine Article III jurisdiction as a threshold matter in proper collateral order appeals. *Merritt* v. *Shuttle, Inc.*, 187 F.3d 263, 269 (2d Cir. 1999); *Timpanogos Tribe* v. *Conway*, 286 F.3d 1195, 1201 (10th Cir. 2002). In contrast, the Eleventh Circuit (like the Ninth Circuit here) has held otherwise. *Moniz* v. *City of Fort Lauderdale*, 145 F.3d 1278, 1281 n.3 (11th Cir. 1998); *Summit Med. Assocs., P.C.* v. *Pryor*, 180 F.3d 1326, 1334-36 (11th Cir. 1999).

The circuit conflict is direct and expanding. In *Merritt*, the Second Circuit, like the panel in this case, addressed an interlocutory appeal under the collateral order doctrine of an order denying a motion to dismiss based on a claim to immunity from suit. 187 F.3d at 267. The court held that, in

addition to resolving the immunity question, it "*must* examine whether the district court had subject matter jurisdiction over the claim now on appeal" because "[t]he existence of subject matter jurisdiction goes to the very power of the district court to issue the rulings now under consideration." *Id.* at 268-69 (emphasis added) (citing *Steel Co.*, 523 U.S. at 101-02). The Second Circuit noted that "review of the district court's order on the [immunity] claim would be meaningless if the district court was without jurisdiction over that claim in the first instance." *Merritt*, 187 F.3d at 269.

Similarly, in *Timpanogos Tribe*, the Tenth Circuit also had before it an interlocutory appeal under the collateral order doctrine of an order denying a motion to dismiss based on a claim to immunity from suit. 286 F.3d at 1198-99. The court held that it first "must address defendants' argument that the district court lacked subject matter jurisdiction over the Tribe's claim," consistent with the "longstanding rule that jurisdiction is a threshold question which an appellate court must resolve before addressing the merits of the matter before it." *Id.* at 1201 (citing *Steel Co.*, 523 U.S. at 94, 95). The Tenth Circuit further noted that its holding was consistent with the Second Circuit's holding in *Merritt*.[8]

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[8] The conclusions of the Second and Tenth Circuits have also found support in the Sixth Circuit. *See Children's Healthcare is a Legal Duty, Inc.* v. *Deters*, 92 F.3d 1412, 1419 (6th Cir. 1996) (opinion of Batchelder, J.). In *Children's Healthcare*, the Sixth Circuit addressed a collateral order appeal of an order denying a motion to dismiss based on a claim to immunity from suit. *Id.* at 1413-14. Even though the appellant did not challenge the district court's ruling that the plaintiffs had standing, Judge Batchelder would have reached the standing issue *sua sponte*. She stated that "when an appellant properly appeals another issue, the issue of standing comes before us as well. Constitutional standing is *always* a threshold inquiry for us to make before asserting jurisdiction over an appeal." *Id.* at 1419 (emphasis in original); *see also id.* at 1419 n.2 ("federal courts, being courts of limited jurisdiction, must examine their subject-matter jurisdiction throughout the pendency of *every* matter before them") (emphasis in original; internal quotation marks omitted).

As the Second and Tenth Circuits recognized, the obligation to examine Article III jurisdiction on interlocutory appeals is fully consistent with the Supreme Court's decision in *Swint* v. *Chambers County Comm'n*, 514 U.S. 35 (1995). *Swint* indicated that the limited scope of pendent appellate jurisdiction includes those issues "necessary to ensure meaningful review" of an interlocutory appeal. *Id.* at 51. As the Second Circuit explained:

> [O]ur examination of the basis for the district court's subject matter jurisdiction over the *Bivens* claim is "necessary to ensure meaningful review of" the district court's order denying qualified immunity on that claim. The existence of subject matter jurisdiction goes to the very power of the district court to issue the rulings now under consideration.

Merritt, 187 F.3d at 269. See also *Timpanogos Tribe*, 286 F.3d at 1201 ("As in *Merritt*, our examination of the basis for the district court's subject matter jurisdiction over the Tribe's claim is necessary to ensure meaningful review of the district court's order denying Eleventh Amendment immunity on that claim.").

In direct conflict with *Merritt* and *Timpanogos Tribe*, the Eleventh Circuit, like the Ninth Circuit here, has refused to address Article III jurisdiction as a threshold matter on collateral order appeals. In *Moniz*, the Eleventh Circuit had before it a collateral order appeal of an order denying a motion for summary judgment based on a claim to immunity from suit. 145 F.3d at 1280. The appellants also asserted that the plaintiff "lack[ed] standing under Article III of the Constitution" to maintain the suit. *Id.* at 1281 n.3. The Eleventh Circuit reached the merits of the immunity issue without addressing this threshold jurisdictional issue, stating in a footnote that the standing issue "does not fall within our pendent appellate jurisdiction under *Swint*." *Id.* Similarly, in *Summit Medical Associates*, the Eleventh Circuit relied on *Moniz* in refusing to address an Article III standing issue in a

collateral order appeal of an order denying a motion to dismiss based on a claim to immunity from suit. 180 F.3d at 1329, 1334-36 & n.8.

In sum, the Ninth Circuit decision below widens the inter-circuit split on an important legal issue of federal court power. The question whether federal courts of appeal must address Article III jurisdiction in proper collateral order appeals is a recurring one, as demonstrated by the recent vintage of the court of appeals' decisions that conflict with the decision below. Given the continuing refusal of some courts of appeals to address Article III jurisdiction in such appeals, this case presents an important and recurring issue concerning the fundamental premises of appellate decision making. That issue warrants review by this Court.

III. THE RULING BELOW REFLECTS A FUNDAMENTAL MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE FEDERAL COURTS' LIMITED POWER TO HEAR CASES AND CONTROVERSIES.

The jurisdictional issue presented in this case goes to the very heart of the federal appeals courts' judicial power. As this Court recognized in *Steel Co.*, 523 U.S. at 101, "[m]uch more than legal niceties are at stake" when questions about jurisdiction arise. For a federal court to reach an issue "when it has no jurisdiction to do so is, by very definition, for a court to act ultra vires." *Id.* at 101-02.

By addressing an important immunity issue (and, indeed, making new law) without even considering whether it and the district court had power to hear the case, the panel below fundamentally misunderstood that the limited role of all federal courts is to hear cases and controversies. This Court consistently has held that Article III means that *no* federal court may render an advisory opinion on an *issue* where no underlying *case* or *controversy* exists. See, *e.g.*, *United States Nat'l Bank of Or.* v. *Independent Ins. Agents of Am., Inc.*, 508 U.S. 439, 446 (1993) ("'The exercise of judicial power under

Art. III of the Constitution depends on the existence of a case or controversy,' and 'a federal court [lacks] the power to render advisory opinions'") (alteration in original) (quoting *Preiser* v. *Newkirk*, 422 U.S. 395, 401 (1975)). "[T]he Article III prohibition against advisory opinions . . . confine[s] federal courts to a role consistent with a system of separated powers." *Flast* v. *Cohen*, 392 U.S. 83, 97 (1968).

The panel below overlooked these fundamental principles by reaching the immunity *issue* without satisfying itself that the *case* was properly within the jurisdiction of the federal courts in the first place. While the collateral order doctrine authorizes the federal appeals courts to resolve certain *issues* prior to a final judgment on the entire case, no doctrine governing federal appellate jurisdiction could override the Article III requirement that a *case* or *controversy* exist before *any* federal court may address *any* substantive issue.

This Court's practice after a grant of certiorari illustrates these principles. This Court's grant of certiorari is ordinarily limited to a particular issue or issues. Nonetheless, as *Vermont Agency* illustrates, it is black-letter law that if an Article III jurisdiction question (including standing) is present, this Court *must* address the jurisdictional question as a threshold matter even though the Court did not grant certiorari on the Article III issue. See, *e.g.*, Robert L. Stern et al., *Supreme Court Practice* 812 (8th ed. 2002) ("[Standing] requirements *must* be satisfied at every stage of a federal court proceeding, from the initiation of the suit to its final review in the Supreme Court. *When a standing problem is present, the Court will give serious attention to the matter even if not raised by the parties or passed upon by the courts below.*") (emphasis added); *Arizonans For Official English* v. *Arizona*, 520 U.S. 43, 73 (1997) (addressing mootness issue because this Court has "an obligation essentially to search the pleadings on core matters of federal-court adjudicatory authority – to inquire not only into this Court's authority to decide the questions petitioners present, but to consider, also,

the authority of the lower courts to proceed"); *FW/PBS, Inc.* v. *City of Dallas*, 493 U.S. 215, 230-31 (1990) (plurality) (addressing standing issue that was neither addressed by the lower federal courts nor raised by either party because "federal courts are under an independent *obligation* to examine their own jurisdiction") (emphasis added); *Bender*, 475 U.S. at 540-41 (1986) (addressing standing question that this Court noticed for the first time after certiorari was granted).

This Court's certiorari practice cannot be squared with the panel's ruling that an appeals court has greater discretion than the Supreme Court to ignore Article III issues. Significantly, the Ninth Circuit's misguided view has the potential substantially to expand the federal appeals courts' ability to issue advisory opinions because it necessarily extends beyond the context of collateral order appeals to other forms of immediate appeal, such as review authorized by 28 U.S.C. § 1292(a) or (b). If, as the Ninth Circuit panel held, federal appellate courts can reach the merits of substantive issues raised in a collateral order appeal, without addressing whether an Article III "case or controversy" exists, then federal appellate courts presumably can ignore the "case or controversy" requirement when they have appellate jurisdiction because of particular issues arising in other interlocutory contexts.

But this Court and the federal appeals courts have properly recognized that in interlocutory appeals under 28 U.S.C. § 1292, Article III jurisdiction issues must be addressed as a threshold matter. Thus, in appeals under section 1292(a) of orders granting or denying injunctive relief, the courts of appeals address first any issue of Article III jurisdiction. See, e.g., *Deckert* v. *Independence Shares Corp.*, 311 U.S. 282, 287-88 (1940) (federal appeals court addressing interlocutory appeal of preliminary injunction under the predecessor to 28 U.S.C. § 1292(a) properly examined the denial of a motion to

dismiss arguing that the district court lacked jurisdiction).[9] *Accord*, 16 Charles Alan Wright et al., *Federal Practice and Procedure* § 3921.1, at 34 & n.14 (2d ed. 1996) (in an interlocutory injunction appeal, "[s]ubject matter jurisdiction always is open"); *Acierno* v. *Mitchell*, 6 F.3d 970, 974 (3d Cir. 1993) (addressing ripeness challenge on appeal of grant of preliminary injunction pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1292(a)(1) because "we . . . must determine whether the issues are ripe for decision in the 'Case or Controversy' sense") (omission in original) (internal quotation marks omitted).[10]

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[9] In *Deckert*, the interlocutory order granting the preliminary injunction was immediately appealable under 28 U.S.C. § 129. 311 U.S. at 286-87. Today, such interlocutory orders are immediately appealable under 28 U.S.C. § 1292(a)(1).

[10] Indeed, in *Meredith* v. *Oregon*, 321 F.3d 807 (9th Cir. 2003), a different panel of the Ninth Circuit held in an interlocutory appeal of a preliminary injunction granted by the district court that in addition to resolving the merits of the preliminary injunction, it also would resolve whether the district court should have abstained under *Younger* v. *Harris*, 401 U.S. 37 (1971), in favor of pending state court proceedings. That panel noted that its approach applied to resolution of other issues as well on interlocutory appeals, including "[r]esolution of subject matter jurisdiction . . . because if appellate courts lack jurisdiction, they cannot review the merits of these properly appealed rulings." *Id.*

The *Meredith* opinion was issued shortly after the oral argument in this case and petitioners promptly brought it to the attention of the panel in this case in a letter pursuant to Fed. R. App. P. 28(j). The panel in this case nevertheless issued its opinion holding that it is "discretionary" whether the court of appeals must first resolve the question of Article III jurisdiction in an interlocutory appeal. Pet. App. 3a n.1. Petitioners again brought *Meredith* to the attention of the panel in their petition for rehearing and suggestion for rehearing en banc, but the panel adhered to its holding that it was not required to address Article III jurisdiction (and "no Judge [on the full court] requested a vote on whether to rehear the matter en banc," Pet. App. 59a). The decision below thus can only mean that the Ninth Circuit treats consideration of Article III jurisdiction on interlocutory appeals as a matter of case-by-case discretion – in clear contravention of *Vermont Agency*.

Standard practice under 28 U.S.C. § 1292(b) also requires that any issue of Article III jurisdiction be resolved first. Section 1292(b) permits circuit courts to exercise appellate jurisdiction when a district court properly certifies for interlocutory appeal orders that "involve[] a controlling question of law as to which there is substantial ground for difference of opinion," where the district court concludes that "immediate appeal from the order may materially advance the ultimate termination of the litigation." The federal appeals courts have properly concluded that in such appeals they must address Article III jurisdiction issues as a threshold matter, even when those Article III issues were *not* certified by the district court. See, *e.g.*, *Larsen* v. *Senate of Pa.*, 152 F.3d 240, 245-46 (3d Cir. 1998) ("[W]e have an *obligation* to determine whether the instant controversy is justiciable prior to our reaching the merits of the issues certified for appeal" under section 1292(b).) (citing *Steel Co.*, 523 U.S. at 93-95) (emphasis added); *Ivy Club* v. *Edwards*, 943 F.2d 270, 275-76 (3d Cir. 1991) ("We *must* necessarily decide the issue of mootness [in section 1292(b) appeal in which district court did not certify that question] because this court has a special obligation to satisfy itself of its own jurisdiction in every appeal presented to it.") (internal quotation marks omitted) (emphasis added); *Kemp* v. *International Bus. Machs. Corp.*, 109 F.3d 708, 711 (11th Cir. 1997) (addressing challenge to district court's jurisdiction over the case prior to reaching the issue certified by the district court under section 1292(b)).

The decision below is in clear tension with these decisions addressing interlocutory appeals under sections 1292(a) and (b). The panel's conclusion that it had no obligation to address Article III jurisdiction in an interlocutory collateral order appeal cannot be reconciled with the holdings of these other courts that such an obligation exists in all proper interlocutory appeals (indeed, all proper appeals) by virtue of Article III's "case or controversy" requirement. Thus, the panel's decision has implications beyond collateral order

appeals and suggests that the Ninth Circuit would likewise consider itself to have discretion to ignore challenges to Article III jurisdiction in other types of interlocutory appeals. The decision thus creates the potential for unchecked issuance of advisory opinions by the Ninth Circuit and other circuits and, as a result, serious encroachment on the separation of powers principles that underlie Article III. For this reason as well, the decision below warrants review by this Court, or even summary reversal.

IV. THE DECISION BELOW PROVIDES AN APPROPRIATE VEHICLE FOR ADDRESSING THE QUESTION PRESENTED.

The circuit conflict presented by this petition is clear, and the panel's decision squarely implicates that conflict. Because of this, petitioners anticipate that respondents' opposition may attempt to divert attention from that important conflict by arguing that the decision below is not an appropriate vehicle for this Court to resolve that conflict. Petitioners address some of these potential arguments below in order to demonstrate that they are red herrings.

A. There Are No Questions Of Fact That Render This Case An Inappropriate Vehicle For Review By This Court Of The Question Presented.

The Ninth Circuit's assertion below that "standing is *potentially* quite fact-dependant in this case" does not render this case an inappropriate vehicle for addressing the core legal issue of whether a court of appeal must address Article III standing in a proper collateral order appeal. See Pet App. 3a n.1 (emphasis added). This is because even when standing is potentially factual, Article III requires a federal court to determine whether the plaintiff has at least *alleged* facts that support standing under the correct legal rule of standing. See *Gwaltney of Smithfield, Ltd.* v. *Chesapeake Bay Found., Inc.*, 484 U.S. 49, 65 (1987) (Article III jurisdiction of a court can only be invoked when a plaintiff makes "allegations" that, if

true, would create standing); *Warth* v. *Seldin*, 422 U.S. 490, 501 (1975) ("Art. III's requirement" is that "the plaintiff . . . must *allege* a distinct and palpable injury to himself") (emphasis added). The Ninth Circuit never stated any legal rule of standing and expressly "decline[d]" to assess whether Sierra had alleged facts sufficient to satisfy the correct rule. Pet. App. 3a n.1.

In this case, petitioners' position has been that Sierra cannot make the necessary allegations under the correct legal rule of standing. To allege Article III standing, Sierra cannot merely allege causation of *some* injury, but instead must allege "the violation of a *legally protected* right." *Vermont Agency*, 529 U.S. at 772-73 (emphasis added). As Sierra's only remaining claim is one under California law for tortious interference, state law must create the "legally protected right." Sierra therefore must satisfy the standing requirements of both Article III and California law. See 13A Charles Alan Wright et al., *Federal Practice and Procedure* § 3531.14, at 90-91 (2d ed. 1984); *Metropolitan Express Servs., Inc.* v. *City of Kansas City, Mo.*, 23 F.3d 1367, 1369 (8th Cir. 1994).

Sierra has asserted that its injury arose from its being the losing bidder in the insurance conservation proceeding. See, *e.g.*, C.A. App. 486 (Sierra brief stating "it was the selection of defendants as the winning bidder in December 1991 . . . which caused Sierra's injury"). But, under *In re Pacific Standard Life Ins. Co.*, 12 Cal. Rptr. 2d at 53, the court held that a disappointed bidder in an insurance conservation lacks a "legally cognizable interest" in the outcome of those proceedings, and has no standing. In *Pacific Standard*, the disappointed bidder, like Sierra here, alleged that its bid would have been selected absent tortious wrongdoing – indeed, that disappointed bidder had a *signed contract* with the conservator, *id.* at 52. The court ruled, nonetheless, that disappointed bidders have "no legally cognizable interest" because of Cal. Ins. Code § 1037. As the court explained, "*[o]nly* by express judicial authorization and prescription of

sales terms may a *legally cognizable interest* be created in any potential buyer in this statutory context." *Id.* at 53 (emphasis added). The "requirement of judicial authorization and prescription of terms fatally attenuated whatever interest, *whether present or prospective*, [the disappointed bidder] claimed to have in the purchase of [the failed company]." *Id.* at 54 (emphasis added). Under *Pacific Standard*, Sierra's "interest *ended* with the court's authorization to sell [the insurance company] to another suitor." *Id.* at 55 (emphasis added).

Sierra has conceded that *Pacific Standard* deprives disappointed bidders (like Sierra) of standing to appeal. *See* Opening Brief of Appellees and Cross-Appellants, *Sierra Nat'l Ins. Holdings, Inc.* v. *Credit Lyonnais S.A.*, Nos. 02-55193, 02-55259 (9th Cir. filed July 15, 2002), at 59. Sierra's sole argument has been that *Pacific Standard* is limited to standing to appeal. See, e.g., *id.* at 58-59. Thus, the standing issue in this case is a purely legal one: whether *Pacific Standard* applies to standing to bring new lawsuits, or is limited to standing to appeal.

The only question presented to this Court is whether a court of appeals must address Article III jurisdiction in a proper collateral order appeal. It is irrelevant to the question presented which side's interpretation of *Pacific Standard* and Cal. Ins. Code § 1037 is correct. Whichever side is correct, standing in this case turns on questions of interpreting the law. The Ninth Circuit's express refusal to address the legal issue of standing, in what it held was a proper collateral order appeal, conflicts with *Vermont Agency* and the decisions of other circuit courts.[11]

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[11] For two independent reasons, Sierra could not avoid this conflict by arguing that it has alleged an injury to a "legally protected right" based on Aurora's allegedly improper receipt of an insurance license. First, as the district court ruled, "Sierra alleges that 'the selection of defendants as the winning bidder in December 1991 . . . caused Sierra's injury,'" and thus,

B. This Court Can Only Review The Question Presented By This Petition While The Case Is In Its Current Posture.

The Ninth Circuit's statement that the standing issue presented in this case, unlike the immunity issue, "can be adequately addressed after a final decision is entered," Pet. App. 3a n.1, does not undermine the appropriateness of review by this Court of the question presented by this petition in its current posture. Petitioners' question presented seeks review of whether Article III required the Ninth Circuit panel to address standing *now* as part of the collateral order appeal. The only time this Court could review the Ninth Circuit's holding that it had discretion to refuse to address Article III jurisdiction on a proper collateral order appeal is by reviewing the ruling on that collateral order appeal itself.

C. The Panel's Unpublished Decision Is An Appropriate Vehicle For Supreme Court Review.

This Court routinely grants certiorari with respect to unpublished decisions, particularly when those decisions squarely implicate circuit conflicts. See, *e.g.*, *Cooper Indus., Inc.* v. *Leatherman Tool Group, Inc.*, 532 U.S. 424, 430-31 (2001) (unpublished Ninth Circuit decision implicating circuit conflict); *Major League Baseball Players Ass'n* v. *Garvey*,

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as the district court further ruled, nothing after that date can provide a basis for a claim by Sierra. Pet. App. 23a. Aurora did not receive its insurance license until December 1992. C.A. App. 354-56. Second, the legal rule in California is that no one has standing to raise a claim for interference with business expectancy based on a government licensing proceeding. See, *e.g.*, *Della Penna* v. *Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc.*, 902 P.2d 740, 749 (Cal. 1995) (noting that interference with business expectancy "d[oes] not encompass injury resulting from government licensing proceedings"); *Sessions Tank Liners, Inc.* v. *Joor Mfg., Inc.*, 17 F.3d 295, 302 (9th Cir. 1994) ("[T]he California Supreme Court has limited the types of prospective advantage that it will protect: a person's expectancy in the outcome of a government licensing proceeding is not protected against outside interference.") (internal quotation marks omitted).

532 U.S. 504, 508 (2001) (summarily reversing an unpublished Ninth Circuit decision); *Buckhannon Bd. & Care Home, Inc.* v. *West Virginia Dep't of Health & Human Res.*, 532 U.S. 598, 602 (2001) (unpublished Fourth Circuit decision implicating circuit conflict); *Carter* v. *United States*, 530 U.S. 255, 260 (2000) (unpublished Third Circuit decision implicating circuit conflict). This practice is appropriate because otherwise, circuit courts could evade this Court's review of decisions creating or widening conflicts simply by not publishing the decisions. The decision below widens a square conflict among the circuit courts and warrants this Court's review.

CONCLUSION

The petition for certiorari should be granted, or this Court should summarily reverse the Ninth Circuit's decision.

Respectfully submitted,

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August 1, 2003

APPENDIX A

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

[Filed Mar. 26, 2003]

No. 02-55193
D.C. No. CV-01-01339-AHM

SIERRA NATIONAL INSURANCE HOLDINGS, INC.; GEORGIA LEE, as Receiver for Sierra National Insurance Holdings, Inc.,

Plaintiffs - Appellees,

v.

CREDIT LYONNAIS S. A.,

Defendant,

and

NEW CALIFORNIA LIFE HOLDINGS, INC.; AURORA NATIONAL LIFE ASSURANCE COMPANY,

Defendants - Appellants.

No. 02-55259
D.C. No. CV-01-01339-AHM

SIERRA NATIONAL INSURANCE HOLDINGS, INC.; GEORGIA LEE, as Receiver for Sierra National Insurance Holdings, Inc.,

Plaintiffs - Appellants,

v.

CREDIT LYONNAIS S. A.,

Defendant,

and

NEW CALIFORNIA LIFE HOLDINGS, INC.; AURORA NATIONAL LIFE ASSURANCE COMPANY,
Defendants - Appellees.

Appeal from the United States District Court
for the Central District of California
A. Howard Matz, District Judge, Presiding

Argued and Submitted February 11, 2003
Pasadena, California

MEMORANDUM *

Before: B. FLETCHER and HAWKINS, Circuit Judges, and BURY, District Judge.**

Appellants, defendants Aurora National Life Assurance Company and New California Life Holdings, Inc. ("Aurora"), file this interlocutory appeal from the district court's order granting in part and denying in part a motion to dismiss filed by all defendants. Aurora appeals the district court's denial of its motion to dismiss plaintiff's state tort claim of interference with business expectancy. Plaintiff, Sierra National Insurance Holdings, Inc. ("Sierra"), cross-appeals dismissal of its RICO claims and its state tort claim of negligent interference with business expectancy.

The parties seek appellate review on the basis of 28 U.S.C. § 1291, which is warranted on an interlocutory basis only under the collateral order rule, which provides "that certain orders may be appealed, notwithstanding the absence of final judgment, but only when they are conclusive, resolve

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* This disposition is not appropriate for publication and may not be cited to or by the courts of this circuit except as provided by Ninth Circuit Rule 36-3.

** The Honorable David C. Bury, United States District Judge for the District of Arizona, sitting by designation.

important questions separate from the merits, and are effectively unreviewable on appeal from the final judgment in the underlying action." *Cunningham v. Hamilton County, Ohio*, 527 U.S. 198, 202 (1999) (internal quotation omitted).

Aurora appeals from the denial of its motion to dismiss, in which it asserted immunity from suit under Cal. Civ. Code § 47(b) and Cal. Ins. Code § 12919. A denial of a motion to dismiss would normally not be a final reviewable order, but a ruling denying a claim of immunity from suit, as opposed to a mere defense to liability, is immediately appealable under the collateral order doctrine. *See Mitchell v. Forsyth*, 472 U.S. 511, 526-27 (1985) (privilege not to stand trial is effectively lost if a case erroneously goes to trial).[1]

We agree with Aurora that Cal. Civ. Code § 47(b) provides not merely a defense to liability, but an immunity from suit. *See Silberg v. Anderson*, 786 P.2d 365, 369-70 (Cal. 1990); *Howard v. Drapkin*, 222 Cal. App. 3d 843, 864 (1990). California has provided by statute a right not to stand trial or

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[1] Aurora would also have us reach the question of Sierra's standing in this interlocutory appeal, arguing that we have pendent appellant jurisdiction over the question. Unlike the immunity issue, however, standing is potentially quite fact-dependant in this case and can be adequately addressed after a final decision is entered. Although the Supreme Court happened to address the question of standing on interlocutory appeal in *Vermont Agency of Natural Resources v. U.S. ex rel. Stevens*, 529 U.S. 765, 771 (2000), nothing in that opinion indicates that an appellate court *must* do so. Indeed, the Court has previously made it quite clear that the exercise of pendant appellate jurisdiction is discretionary and should be reserved for rare cases in which the rulings are "inextricably intertwined." *Swint v. Chambers County Commission*, 514 U.S. 35, 50-51 (1995). This is not such a case. We therefore heed the Court's caution that "loosely allowing pendent appellate jurisdiction would encourage parties to parlay *Cohen*-type collateral orders into multi-issue interlocutory appeal tickets," *id.* at 49-50, and decline to address the question of Sierra's standing at this time.

to face the burdens of litigation, a right which is effectively lost if a case erroneously goes to trial. This important interest warrants immediate appellate review.[2]

We therefore consider whether the communications made by Aurora in relation to the rehabilitation proceedings fall within the Section 47(b) privilege. The privilege applies to any communication "(1) made in judicial or quasi-judicial proceedings; (2) by litigants or other participants authorized by law; (3) to achieve the objects of the litigation; and (4) that have some connection or logical relation to the action." *Silberg*, 786 P.2d at 369.

The district court properly found that Aurora's communications did not fall within this privilege. The function of the rehabilitation proceeding was exceptionally narrow—to reorganize the failed insurance company—and not to resolve legal disputes between potential bidders. The communications were thus not "made in judicial or quasi-judicial proceedings" of the type described in Cal. Civ. Code § 47(b). Moreover, the statements did not "have some connection or logical relation" to the rehabilitation proceeding, and thus are not protected communications under Section 47(b). *See Sacramento Brewing Co. v. Desmond, Miller & Desmond*, 75 Cal. App. 4th 1082, 1089 (1999) (explaining that "logical-relation" test for the litigation privilege includes requirement that communication be in furtherance of the objects of the litigation).

We AFFIRM the district court's denial of Aurora's motion to dismiss on the grounds of immunity under Cal. Civ. Code § 47(b). All other issues presented in this appeal are DISMISSED for lack of jurisdiction.

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[2] In contrast, there is no case law or legislative history to suggest that Cal. Ins. Code § 12919 is an immunity from suit versus a mere defense, and we thus lack jurisdiction to address the merits of the district court's ruling that Section 12919 does not immunize Aurora from liability.

APPENDIX B

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
CENTRAL DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

[Filed Dec. 18, 2001]

CASE NO. CV 01-01339 AHM (CWx)

SIERRA NATIONAL INSURANCE HOLDINGS, INC., *et al.*,
Plaintiffs,

v.

ALTUS FINANCE, S.A., *et al.*,
Defendants.

ORDER GRANTING IN PART AND DENYING IN PART DEFENDANTS' MOTIONS TO DISMISS THE FIRST AMENDED COMPLAINT

These exhaustively-briefed motions require no hearing and the Court will not conduct a hearing. *See* Fed.R.Civ.P. 78 and L.R. 7-15.

I.

BACKGROUND

All defendants move either directly or by joinder to dismiss all the claims in the First Amended Complaint ("FAC"). The parties are familiar with this case and its history. The Court will not review it. Because of their familiarity, the Court also dispenses with reference to the parties' full names.

II.

THE FAC

All the substantive causes of action are against all the defendants. They are as follows.

Number	Claim
1	"Intentional Interference With Business Expectancy By Wrongful Conduct"
2	"Intentional Interference With Business Expectancy By Misrepresentations"
3	"Negligent Interference With Business Expectancy"
4	RICO: § 1962(B)
5	RICO: § 1962(C)
6	RICO: § 1962(D)
7	Abuse of Process.

Claims three and seven previously were dismissed and the Court dismisses them again, with prejudice.

III.

LITIGATION PRIVILEGE

In its prior Order, the Court decided that, as pled, Sierra's complaint was vulnerable to dismissal under Civil Code Section 47(b), but found troubling the result "that an alleged fraudulent wrongdoer might escape state law-based liability to its victim." Order, p.11. Based on "standard principles of pleading," the Court gave Sierra leave to "amend the complaint to allege state-based claims for relief that do not so directly and inextricably depend on or relate to privileged communications in the Conservation Court proceedings." *Id.*

In the First Amended Complaint ("FAC"), Sierra has done so, as the following analysis demonstrates.[1]

A. *Proper Construction of Section 47(b) In This Case*

In its prior Order in this case, the Court noted that "in California the litigation privilege is extremely broad." (Page 7.) Certainly, language in *Silberg v. Anderson*, 50 Cal.3d 205, 212 (1990) can be applied expansively: there the Supreme Court stated that the privilege "applies to any publication required or permitted by law in the course of a judicial proceeding to achieve the objects of the litigation, even though the publication is made outside the courtroom and no function of the court or its officers is involved." [2] *Id.* But there *are* limits.

Before addressing defendants' specific contentions, the Court must address a fundamental assumption that has pervaded the parties' briefs (as well as, to be sure, the Court's prior order). That assumption is that the proceeding in the Rehabilitation Court was a "litigation." There is no doubt that literally and practically speaking it was a "judicial proceeding"—the term actually used in § 47(b)—but whether it was

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[1] The Court rejects Sierra's newly-asserted argument that under Fed.R. Evid. 501 the § 47(b) litigation privilege does not apply in this federal action. § 47(b) is not an evidentiary privilege that protects a communication from compelled disclosure but a state-created substantive immunity that operates as a limitation on liability. *Moore v. Conliffe*, 7 Cal.4th 634, 638 n.1 (1994). As such, Evidence Code 501 is not implicated.

[2] In its prior Order, this Court stated at page 10, "Plaintiffs do not argue that these misrepresentations [*i.e.*, those made by defendants] were not made to achieve the objects of the litigation or that they had no connection or logical relation to the action. Thus, in this case and under these allegations, even misrepresentations made to the Commissioner or Sierra in the course of procuring a license would be covered by the privilege." In opposing this motion, plaintiffs *do* explicitly contend that the alleged misrepresentations and omissions "do not qualify" under the "connection or logical relation" test. [Opposition, p. 4.]

the kind of proceeding that classically implicates the litigation privilege is another matter.

The *Silberg* court articulated four policy reasons for Section 47(b). (See the Court's prior order, page 6.) Those reasons are carefully considered in *Edwards v. Centex Real Estate Corporation*, 53 Cal.App.4th 15 (1997). As to the first *Silberg* purpose ("freedom of access to the courts without fear of being harassed subsequently by derivative tort actions," *Silberg* at 213), the *Edwards* court characterized such freedom as a "fundamental right of resort to the courts for assistance in the resolution of . . . disputes. . ." 53 Cal.App. 4th at 29. *See also Id.* at 36 ("the privilege attaches at that point in time that imminent access to the courts . . . [is necessary] for the purpose of resolving a dispute . . ." Unlike a court of general jurisdiction or even a court or division having limited or specialty jurisdiction, such as a Family Court, the function of the Rehabilitation Court was to preside over the reorganization of one failed insurance company, not to resolve legal disputes among parties.

Moreover, as the FAC makes clear, when the proceedings in the Rehabilitation Court were actively underway, the fundamental nature of the relationships and dealings of all the parties to this lawsuit was that they were bidding for and negotiating an extraordinarily complicated business deal. While the Commissioner's decision as to the buyer and the terms ultimately required Rehabilitation Court approval, his *functions* and those of the defendants were not, to use the current vernacular, primarily in the "litigation mode." Instead, they were fundamentally transactional: trying to reach an agreement and get the best terms possible. The parties to this case were not suing each other or even threatening to do so.[3]

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[3] To be sure, various banks, indentured trustees, underwriters and ELIC contract holders did file appeals from certain rulings to the Court of

The fourth purpose of Section 47(b) that the *Silberg* court identified was to "place upon litigants the burden of exposing during trial the bias of witnesses and the falsity of evidence, thereby enhancing the finality of judgments and avoiding an unending roundelay of litigation. . . ." *Silberg* at 214. The *Edwards* court noted that as to this policy, "the privilege is intended to force litigants to utilize the available discovery apparatus to uncover the truth prior to final judgment." *Edwards* at 30. Here, the FAC alleges at ¶ 74,

> The Rehabilitation Court refused to allow discovery by any party into the question whether defendants' bid would give Credit Lyonnais and Altus control over Executive Life, ruling that the issue was outside the scope of the Rehabilitation proceeding. Nor was that issue ever considered or adjudicated by the Rehabilitation Court.[4]

In short, the FAC differs from the original complaint; the proceedings in and related to the Rehabilitation Court are very far from the paradigmatic context for a litigation privilege; and plaintiffs now have alleged, and appear likely to demonstrate, that some of the fundamental purposes or rationales of Section 47(b) were not present in the Rehabilitation Court proceedings. Given these facts, it would be misguided to apply Section 47(b) expansively. On this motion to dismiss, moreover, the allegations are to be construed favorably to plaintiffs.

Appeals. See, *e.g.*, *Executive Life Ins. Co. v. Aurora National Life Assurance Co.*, 32 Cal.App.4th 344, 355 (1995).

[4] There is ample support for this allegation in the voluminous factual record the parties chose to submit on this motion. *E.g.*, Belgum Decl., Ex. A, p. 3-4; Ex. B, p. 7-8.

B. *Sierra's Intentional Interference with Economic Expectancy Claim is Not Dependent on Defendants' Alleged Misrepresentations*

In its prior order, the Court found that, as alleged, Sierra's state law claims did not fall outside the "application of 47(b) on the basis that their claims, as alleged, challenge conduct as opposed to communications." (Page 8.) Now, in the FAC's first cause of action, styled as "Intentional Interference With Business Expectancy By Wrongful Conduct," the FAC asserts a claim that purportedly based only on conduct, not communications; it alleges that the Defendants wrongfully took possession of the ELIC assets in violation of state and federal law and that had they not done so, Sierra would have won those assets.

The question is whether this claim for relief is necessarily dependent on Defendants' alleged fraud in persuading the Commissioner and the Rehabilitation Court to approve their acquisition of the ELIC assets. At first blush, the fraud does appear to be essential to the claim. The FAC itself alleges that it was the misrepresentations of defendants (primarily or at least initially Altus, Credit Lyonnais, the MAAF entities and Omnium Geneve) that enabled defendants to prevent Sierra from securing the assets. *See, e.g.*, ¶¶ 52-55; 63-64; 71-82 and most of the ensuing paragraphs, especially ¶¶ 109-111. However, just because Defendants' fraud was a but-for cause of plaintiff's injury does not mean that the fraud is a necessary element of this claim.

Sierra persuasively argues that Defendants' fraudulent *means* of acquiring the ELIC assets is not essential to Sierra's claim that it would have acquired the assets had Defendants not illegally done so, and it does allege that Defendants were not entitled to acquire or hold those assets regardless of whether they obtained them fraudulently. *E.g.*, ¶¶ 51-54; 60; 124. Analytically speaking, that Defendants may have fraudulently concealed facts that would have precluded them

from obtaining the assets is not an inextricable element of this claim. Given this construction, the Court is loath to permit Defendants to take advantage of their own allegedly fraudulent communications to shield themselves from potential liability.

C. *Defendants' Other Arguments*

1. *Whether Credit Lyonnais/Altus Could Have Obtained Legal Approval Is A Factual Question That Does Not Warrant Dismissing the Claim*

Next, the Court rejects Defendants' argument that the Commissioner in fact *could* have legally approved their bid, and that therefore "Sierra's only possible claim is that the Defendants obtained the Commissioner's satisfaction, and the Conservation Court's approval, through misrepresentations, not that the alleged relationship was illegal per se and could not be approved." Aurora Motion, p.5.

The version of Cal. Ins. Code § 699.5 in effect at the time provided that "Except as provided in subdivision (b), a certificate of authority shall not issue to any insurer owned, operated, or controlled, directly or indirectly, by any other . . . nation or any governmental subdivision or agency thereof." Subdivision (b) provided in relevant part:

> "The ownership or financial control, *in part,* of any . . . insurer by any . . . foreign government . . . shall not restrict the commissioner from issuing . . . the license of that insurer . . . provided . . . [the Commissioner is satisfied] that the ownership or financial control will not result in *substantial or undue influence* being asserted over the insurer." (Emphasis added).

Therefore, under § 699.5, Defendants' argument is dependent on the existence of certain facts, such as that NCLH was not wholly dominated by Altus. But Sierra alleges that the "portage agreements" provided that "MAAF, MAAF Vie, and Omnium Geneve would only exercise their rights as

shareholders of the new Executive Life at the direction of Altus" and that "they would sell their shares in the new Executive Life to Altus at a predetermined price." FAC ¶ 52.[5] This language can be construed as an allegation of *total* control by Altus (and indirectly Credit Lyonnais) over the NCLH shareholders. Consequently, what Sierra has alleged is not merely that defendants controlled the ostensible purchaser "in part" (such that the Commissioner lawfully could have approved the acquisition) but that they exercised complete control. Just what was the extent of defendants' control is a factual question. At this pleading stage, however, Sierra has sufficiently alleged violation of section 699.5.[6]

2. *The Tort Occurred Before Sierra Was Dissolved*

The Court rejects Aurora's and NCLH's argument that "in contrast to the alleged misrepresentations, the alleged violations of [Insurance Code] §699.5 and the BHCA themselves did not occur until *after* the selection and approval of the Altus/MAAF bid, and the dissolution of Sierra, and thus could not have caused Sierra's alleged injury." [Aurora/NCLH Motion, p.4]. This argument relies on the technicality that although the Commissioner selected the Altus/MAAF bid in 1991 and the Conservation Court approved the bid in 1991, no certificate of authority was issued to Aurora until December 16, 1992, some eight months

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[5] The November 14, 1991 Management Agreement between Altus and MAAF contains language that restricted MAAF's rights as NCLH shareholder or a member of its governing body, except as agent for Altus. [Belgum Decl., Ex. D, p.20].

[6] It is unnecessary at this point to resolve defendants' arguments about the allegations concerning the Bank Holding Company Act ("BHCA.") The Court reiterates its earlier statement that there is no private right of action for violation of the BHCA, but Sierra's claims are not premised explicitly on such a cause of action. To the extent that the element of "wrongfulness" is part of their interference claims, evidence of the BHCA filings would appear to be admissible.

after Sierra was dissolved. Nor did Aurora begin insurance operations until September 3, 1993. The Court agrees with Sierra that "it was no less 'wrongful' for defendants to enter into their contract with the Commissioner for the acquisition of ELIC—with the concealed portage agreements in place—than to consummate it, particularly since it was the selection of defendants as the winning bidder in December 1991, long before Sierra's dissolution, which caused Sierra's injury." Opposition, p.6.

3. *The Interference Claim Is Not Time Barred*

Defendants assert that Sierra's claim is time-barred because Sierra cannot rely on their fraudulent communications, which defendants claim are privileged, to toll the statute of limitations on a theory of fraudulent concealment. The sole case defendants rely on, *Thompson v. California Fair Plan*, 221 Cal. App. 3d 760, 270 Cal.Rptr. 590 (1990), held simply that a time-barred conspiracy claim could not be revived by an overt act that was privileged under the California litigation privilege. *Id.* at 767-768. That court reasoned that to maintain a conspiracy action there must be an overt act that is itself a tort. If the last alleged overt act that would extend the statute is privileged, it would not be tortious and so it could not prevent the running of the statute of limitations. Here, the crux of Sierra's claim for relief is not conspiracy and even if under Section 47(b) defendants' communications could not be a basis for imposing liability, their statements would be admissible not only to establish how defendants went about committing their alleged torts but also to explain Sierra's inability to learn about and pursue its claims sooner.

4. *Settimo v. Environ Systems Does Not Require Dismissal*

The Court also rejects defendants' assertion that *Settimo v. Environ Systems*, 14 Cal.App. 4th 842, 846 (1993), stands for

the proposition that tortious interference claims cannot be based on the defendant's non-fraudulent violation of a licensing or other statute, such as California Insurance Code § 699.5, if such claims would undermine the regulatory agency's function. In *Settimo,* a disappointed bidder for computer facility installation contracts sued the winning bidder for interference with prospective economic advantage. Plaintiff alleged that defendant was not lawfully entitled to obtain the job because it lacked a general contracting license and that the lack of that license "alone" satisfied the elements of unlawful contract interference. The Court noted 1) that the grantor of the contract was a private, not public, entity and 2) that defendant was not unqualified to do the work, did fully perform the contracts and subsequently acquired the appropriate general contractor's license. *Id.* at 844 fn.2, 846. The Court stated:

> *We conclude the fact [defendant] was not properly licensed at the time it was awarded these contracts does not amount to actionable unlawful interference with contracts. We are cited to no statutory authority requiring a private entity to accept bids only from duly licensed contractors.* The Business and Professions Code which contains statutory licensing regulations neither creates nor denies any civil remedy to bidders who lose projects to unlicensed competitors. Granted, [defendant's] conduct amounted to a misdemeanor and foreclosed any possibility of its suing to enforce an awarded contract (Bus. & Prof. Code, §§ 7028, subd. (a), 7031.) However, these regulatory sections fall within the responsibility of the Contractors' Licensing Board to sanction such misconduct. They do not create any action for civil damages in a competing bidder.

Id. at 846 (emphasis added). *Settimo* is distinguishable. Unlike here, in that case there was no statute precluding defendant from obtaining the contract, there was no public agency involved and the plaintiff did not assert, as Sierra

does, that only it and not defendant could legally bid for and win the contract or assets. Moreover, here the regulatory authority in question—the Insurance Commissioner—does not contend that Sierra's suit would undermine his functions.

5. "*Bid Rigging*"

The FAC asserts that

> On June 19 2001, after a lengthy investigation, the Attorney General of the State of California, filed an action in which he alleged, inter alia, that Credit Lyonnais and Altus unfairly and improperly manipulated the bid process to their own advantage and to the disadvantage of Sierra, by engaging in a series of activities, including but not limited to:
>
> (a) obtaining . . . information . . . not made available to others;
>
> . . .
>
> (d) establishment of undue influence with the bidding agency prior to the conservatorship to establish a bidding process that was favorable to them, was disadvantageous to other bidders, and was improper in an auction of publicly owned assets;
>
> (e) use of improper means to eliminate other bidders who threatened to either win the bid from them, or to increase the price they would have to pay;
>
> . . .

FAC ¶ 44. Sierra asserts that these allegations present grounds for liability outside the ambit of Section 47 because they demonstrate 1) wrongful non-communicative conduct and 2) extrinsic fraud, in that they "establish that Sierra was fraudulently prevented from presenting its bid on terms which gave it any chance of being accepted." Opposition, p.11.

Defendants argue that Sierra, in effect, is estopped from raising the issue of "inside information" because that issue was already "actively and publicly litigated by others in the

Rehabilitation proceedings and *rejected* by the Conservation Court and the California Court of Appeal. *See, e.g., Executive Life*, 32 Cal.App.4th at 361, 38 Cal.Rptr.2d at 462. . . . [Reply Memo, p.12.] However, statements made in passing by the Court of Appeal that "care was taken to provide other potential investors with access to the same information that Altus possessed" and by the Conservation Court that "ELIC opened a data room to enable any parties interested in acquiring some or all of ELIC's assets to conduct due diligence" do not at all preclude Sierra from attempting to prove that defendants used improper means and undue influence to reap an unfair advantage. Defendants' argument is based on inconclusive comments and basically amounts to an assertion that Sierra cannot prove the charge. Such an assertion does not warrant dismissal.

Defendants also assert that their alleged "bid rigging" was not wrongful, because "Sierra does not and cannot claim that the Commissioner's or ELIC's providing information to Altus violated any statutory or other legal requirement." Reply, p.9. Although Sierra does not cite a statute or case specifically making unlawful the conduct alleged in FAC ¶ 44, this is not fatal. *See Marin Tug & Barge v. Westport Petroleum*, 238 F.3d 1159, 1163 (9th Cir. 2001) (noting that in determining wrongfulness in interference cases, some California courts have looked to "improper motives" or "improper means" and querying whether defendant's conduct "was contrary to the laws *or public policies* of the State of California"). The Court rejects defendants' contention that Sierra's allegations of undue influence, obtaining information not available to other bidders and improperly eliminating other bidders do not allege wrongfulness.

IV.

RICO CLAIMS

A. *Sierra Alleges an Injury to Business*

In its prior order, the Court opined that as pled, Sierra's RICO claim did not state an injury to business and granted Sierra leave to attempt to do so. Under the governing legal standard, Sierra's FAC successfully alleges a business interest.

It is not required that a plaintiff actually be engaged in a going business. Instead, a manifestation of intent to enter the business and a demonstration of one's preparedness to do so is sufficient. *See, e.g., Central Telecommunications, Inc. v. TCI Cablevision, Inc.*, 800 F.2d 711, 727-29 (8th Cir. 1986); *Huron Valley Hospital v. City of Pontiac*, 666 F.2d 1029, 1033 (6th Cir. 1981). The Ninth Circuit endorses a "four factor 'intention and preparedness' test" under which it decides whether a plaintiff has asserted an injury to business. *Fine v. Barry and Enright Productions*, 731 F. 2d 1394, 1397 (9th Cir. 1984) (antitrust case). The test considers (1) the background and experience of plaintiff in his prospective business, (2) affirmative action on the part of plaintiff to engage in the proposed business, (3) the ability of plaintiff to finance the business and the purchase of equipment and facilities necessary to engage in the business, and (4) the consummation of contracts by the plaintiff. *Id.*

The FAC asserts that (1) Sierra's owners and directors had national reputations in managing insurance companies and evaluating and managing high yield bonds (¶ 42); (2) Sierra made large financial commitments to support its bid, including an undertaking to provide a billion dollars to protect against any decline in the value of ELIC's bond portfolio (*Id.*); (3) Sierra expended millions of dollars for actuaries, accountants, attorneys and other professionals in preparing its bids (¶ 43); (4) Sierra expended the time of the

directors, senior officers and other employees of its owners on an almost continuous basis throughout the lengthy bidding process, incurring large expenses in the process (*Id.*); and (5) Sierra submitted three detailed bids for ELIC (¶¶ 45, 46, 49). This is sufficient to meet the four part test outlined in *Fine. See Central Telecom*, 800 F.2d at 729 (plaintiff made sufficient preparations to enter cable television business where it raised over $300,000 in capital, had experience in the industry, secured additional financing commitments, submitted detailed plans for its cable system and secured initial (later revoked) approval from the City Council); *Huron Valley Hospital*, 666 F.2d at 1033 (sufficient that plaintiff acquired a site for hospital, conducted feasibility studies, entered into contracts with employees, despite failure to obtain "certificate of need" from state agency).[7]

B. *Plaintiff Has Failed To Allege Proximate Cause*

The Ninth Circuit has recognized that in private RICO actions the alleged violation of the law must be the "proximate cause" of the injury suffered. *Assoc. of Washington Public Hospital Districts v. Philip Morris, Inc.*, 241 F.3d 696, 701 (9th Cir. 2001) applying and citing the Supreme Court's decision in *Holmes v. Securities Investor*

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[7] Merely because Sierra's Certificate of Dissolution, filed April 23, 1992 states that "[t]he business for which the corporation was organized has not begun" (King Decl., Ex. 1, to Artemis Motion) does not change this analysis. That statement referred to actual insurance operations. Neither *Reaemco, Inc. v. Allegheny Airlines*, 496 F. Supp. 546 (S.D.N.Y. 1980), nor *Bubar v. Ampco Foods, Inc.*, 752 F. 2d 445 (9th Cir. 1985), both cited by the defendants, are to the contrary. In *Reaemco*, the complaint failed to allege that the plaintiff had consummated any contracts or had the financial resources to effectuate its plan. *Reaemco*, 496 F. Supp. at 554. Similarly, in *Bubar*, the plaintiff failed to establish that it had entered into contracts or that it had the financial resources to complete the purchase at issue. *Bubar*, 752 F.2d at 452. Here, although the plaintiff does not assert that it consummated any contracts with the ELIC, it clearly alleges that it had the financial resources to do so.

Protection Corp., 503 U.S. 258, 112 S.Ct. 1311 (1992). In *Holmes*, the Supreme Court found that proximate cause was absent, in part because the harm to the plaintiffs/stock purchasers was "purely contingent" on the harm suffered by the broker/dealers. *Holmes*, 503 U.S. at 271. Similarly, in *Association of Washington Public Hospital Districts*, the Ninth Circuit noted that absent an injury to smokers, the hospital districts would have suffered no injury. *Assoc. of Washington Public Hospital Districts*, 241 F.3d at 703.

In *Dow Chemical v. Exxon*, 30 F.Supp.2d 673 (D.Del. 1998), the defendant defrauded the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office ("PTO") into granting it certain patent rights. The Court found that the PTO, *not* the injured competitor of the defendant, was the "direct victim" of defendant's fraud, because the plaintiff-competitor's harm was caused by the choices of customers made subsequent to and allegedly in response to the agency's determinations regarding the scope of the defendant's intellectual property rights. The harm was clearly derivative.

A central element of the proximate cause determination is whether the plaintiff has asserted a direct relationship between the injury and the alleged wrongdoing, or whether the defendant's acts stand at "too remote" a distance for the plaintiff to recover. *Assoc. of Washington Public Hospital Districts*, 241 F.3d at 701 *(citing Oregon Laborers-Employers Health & Welfare Trust Fund v. Philip Morris Inc.*, 185 F.3d 957, 963 (9th Cir. 1999). To determine whether an injury is "too remote" to allow recovery under RICO, the court applies a three-factor test: (1) whether there are more direct victims of the alleged wrongful conduct who can be counted on to vindicate the law; (2) whether it will be difficult to ascertain the amount of the plaintiff's damages attributable to the defendant's wrongful conduct; and (3) whether the court will have to adopt complicated rules apportioning damages to obviate the risk of multiple

recoveries. *Assoc. of Washington Public Hospital Districts*, 241 F.3d. at 701-02.

Here, Defendants assert that Sierra's alleged harm is too indirect to survive the pleading stage because 1) the Commissioner was more directly injured than Sierra; 2) Sierra's damages are speculative; and 3) Sierra's claims compete with the Commissioner's and thus require rules of apportionment of damages. The Court agrees with the first and third contentions.

The Court acknowledges that Sierra has alleged that it is *a* victim, and not merely in a "but for" sense. But "more direct victim" does not mean "only" victim. Just because Sierra is a victim does not require or even allow the Court to ignore what is elsewhere alleged in the FAC itself: namely, that defendants directly deceived the Commissioner and the Rehabilitation Court. True, Sierra alleges that defendants, primarily the French Group, "delivered" directly to or served upon "Sierra and others" a number of fraudulent documents (*e.g.*, FAC ¶¶ 77, 78, 80, 93) and made other false statements to Sierra that were also made to the Commissioner and other parties (*e.g.*, FAC ¶ 82). But there are other, far more numerous allegations that accuse defendants of making misrepresentations *only* to the Commissioner or the Rehabilitation Court. (*E.g.*, FAC ¶¶ 81, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 89, 90, 91, 92, 95, 96, 97 (Artemis), 99 (Artemis), 100 (Aurora), 105 (Artemis and Pinault). Although in the FAC Sierra pleads its claims cleverly so as to avoid having them be explicitly dependent on the defendants' fraudulent communications, nevertheless those communications comprise the core of plaintiff's factual allegations. While the respective claimed injuries of the Commissioner and Sierra are not identical, it is indisputable that the principal wrong was suffered by the Commissioner; he is the more direct victim.

"At bottom, the notion of proximate cause reflects 'ideas of what justice demands, or of what is administratively possible

and convenient.'" *Holmes, supra,* 503 U.S. at 268, 112 S.Ct. 1318 (citation deleted). From the imprecise policy standpoint of "what justice demands," this RICO action is dubious. As the Supreme Court also stated in *Holmes:*

> [T]he need to grapple with these problems [*i.e.*, the difficulty of ascertaining the amount of damage and apportioning damages among plaintiffs removed at different levels of injury from the violative acts] is simply unjustified by the general interest in deterring injurious conduct, since directly injured victims can generally be counted on to vindicate the law as private attorneys general, without any of the problems attendant upon suits by plaintiffs injured more remotely . . .
>
> Indeed, we fear that RICO's remedial purposes would more probably be hobbled than helped . . . Allowing suits by those injured only indirectly would open the door to massive and complex damages litigation [, which would] not only burde[n] the courts, but [would] also undermine[e] the effectiveness of treble-damages suits.

Id., 503 U.S. at 269, 274, 112 S.Ct. at 1318, 1321 (citation deleted).

These considerations are present here. In fact, even Sierra alleges that the actual Attorney General—not merely a "private" one—is suing most of these defendants. FAC ¶ 44.[8] And, of course, so is the Commissioner of Insurance. Indeed, the Commissioner's suit is not only remarkably similar to Sierra's, but it was the genesis of this action. FAC ¶¶ 113-114.

As to the difficulty of ascertaining damages and whether plaintiff's claimed damages are too speculative, the Court recognizes that this is a close question. Sierra's claim depends on whether the Commissioner and the Conservation Court

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[8] That case, like many others arising out of ELIC's collapse, has been assigned to this Court.

would have approved its bid. Sierra alleges that the Commissioner represented that he would choose between Sierra's and Defendants' bid (FAC ¶¶ 5, 47, 48).[9] Nevertheless, the Court must still hypothesize that the Conservation Court would have approved the Commissioner's agreement with Sierra and that the deal would have been upheld by the California Court of Appeal. In its prior order this Court dealt with the uncertainty inherent in these assumptions, especially in the discussion of *Imagineering v. Kiewit*, 976 F.2d 1303 (9th Cir. 1992). (*See* pp. 18-21 of Prior Order.) For the reasons the Court previously articulated in its discussion of *Iconco v. Jensen Construction Co.*, 622 F.2d 1291 (8th Cir. 1980) at pp. 15-17 of the prior order, the Court remains persuaded that while it is highly doubtful that Sierra could in fact prove what it has alleged, at least it has established a sufficient pleading basis to try.[10] However, the Court also concludes that the differing but closely related claims of both Sierra and the Commissioner would call for a complex rule of damages apportionment.[11]

To summarize, at least two of the factors that this Court is required to assess—namely, the presence of a more directly injured party and the likelihood of a complicated damages apportionment—lead the Court to conclude that Sierra has failed to allege, and cannot allege, the requisite proximate cause. The RICO claims must be dismissed without leave to amend.

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[9] The Court of Appeal in one of its opinions stated that the Commissioner "narrowed the bidders to Altus and Sierra. . . ." *Executive Life Ins. Co. v. Aurora Nat'l Life Assurance Co.*, 32 Cal.App.4th 344, 363 (1995).

[10] The Court recognizes that *Iconco* was not a RICO case.

[11] Given the Court's conclusion that there is a more direct victim than Sierra, it is unnecessary to elaborate on this finding.

V.

ALL CLAIMS AGAINST ARTEMIS AND PINAULT MUST BE DISMISSED

The separately-filed motion of the Artemis Parties and Pinault (collectively, "Artemis") raises an additional important issue. Artemis argues that all of Sierra's claims against it fail because Artemis did not commit any of the acts that caused Sierra's alleged injury and Artemis did not even join the alleged conspiracy until after Sierra was injured. Artemis is correct.

- ¶ 1 states that "[t]his case arises out of defendants' illegal acquisition of the assets of" ELIC.

- ¶ 82 refers to a deliberate and premeditated plan *by Altus and Credit Lyonnais* to obtain control of ELIC's bond portfolio and insurance business in violation of California and federal law; it does not allege that other defendants conceived that plan.

- Sierra alleges that "but for the French Group's fraud" its "bid would have been selected, and it would have made at least the same level of profit as defendants made." FAC ¶ 111. The "French Group" is defined to include Altus, Credit Lyonnais, the two MAAF entities and Omnium Geneve. FAC ¶ 39. Pinault and the Artemis Parties are not included in this term.

- The first event or transaction alleged to involve Pinault and the Artemis Parties occurred on December 24, 1992 (FAC ¶ 56), some eight months after Sierra filed its Certificate of Dissolution. Artemis is alleged to have first sought the Commissioner's approval to acquire NCLH as late as July 1995 (FAC ¶ 98). That is the event that plaintiff points to in alleging a culpable failure by Artemis to disclose. (FAC ¶ 105).

Sierra alleges that "the selection of defendants as the winning bidder in December 1991 . . . caused Sierra's injury."

Opposition, p.6. Therefore, Sierra's substantive RICO claims against the Defendants would have to be dismissed as to Artemis because Sierra cannot allege that it was injured "by reason of" any of Artemis's acts.[12]

The same reasoning requires dismissal of Sierra's "interference" claims against Artemis (counts 1-3). What Sierra complains of concerning the Artemis parties are non-disclosures that Sierra claims should have been made as a part of those defendants' acquisition of ownership and/or controlling interest in NCLH. This conduct occurred entirely after Sierra went out of business. It cannot have constituted an interference with Sierra's business expectancy.

VI.

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, it is ORDERED that:

A. The motions of defendants Aurora, NCLH, Credit Lyonnais, the Altus Parties (including CDR Enterprises), and the MAAF Parties (as well as those of any other defendants who joined in those motions) to dismiss causes of action one and two are DENIED.

B. The motions of the above-identified defendants to dismiss causes of action three through seven (3-7) are GRANTED, without leave to amend.

C. The motions of defendants Pinault and the Artemis Parties to dismiss all of the causes of action against them are GRANTED, without leave to amend.

Dated: December 18, 2001 /s/ A. Howard Matz
A. HOWARD MATZ
United States District Judge

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[12] Given this ruling and the ruling above concerning the absence of proximate cause, it is unnecessary to address the parties' claims as to the validity against Artemis of Sierra's civil RICO conspiracy claim.

APPENDIX C

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT,
C.D. CALIFORNIA

No. CV 01-01339 AHM(CWX)

SIERRA NATIONAL INSURANCE HOLDINGS, INC., *et al.*

v.

ALTUS FINANCE, S.A., *et al.*

June 20, 2001

ORDER GRANTING DEFENDANTS' MOTION TO DISMISS

INTRODUCTION

Plaintiffs are Sierra National Insurance Holdings, Inc., a dissolved Delaware corporation and Georgia Lee, as receiver for Sierra National Insurance Holdings, Inc. They bring suit against the same defendants as in *Low v. Altus Finance, S.A., et al.*, and based on the same course of fraud alleged in that case.[1] This Court's prior Orders in the *Low* case summarize those allegations. *See Low v. Altus Finance, S.A., et al.*, 136 F.Supp.2d 1113 (C.D.Cal.2001). Briefly, in *Low*, the California Commissioner of Insurance alleges that the defendants defrauded him and the Conservation Court by

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[1] Those defendants are Credit Lyonnais S.A., Altus Finance S.A., C.D.R. Enterprises, MAAF Assurances, MAAF Vie S.A., Omnium Geneve S.A., Consortium de Realisation, S.A., Francois Pinault, Jean-Claude Seys, Jean-Francois Henin, Jean Irigoin, Artemis S.A., Artemis Finance S.N.C., Artemis America, New California Life Holdings, Inc. and Aurora National Life Assurance Company, Inc.

misrepresenting their ownership structure, thereby inducing him to accept their bid for the assets of Executive Life Insurance Company ("ELIC"), a failing insurance company in rehabilitation. The Commissioner seeks damages, including the return of those assets. Sierra was a rival bidder for the ELIC assets. In this case Sierra alleges that:

> Plaintiff Sierra National Insurance Holdings, Inc. was ultimately the only competing bidder for Executive Life. As such, it was the principal victim of defendants' deceptions. But for their wrongful conduct, Sierra would have acquired Executive Life and realized the profits which defendants illegally secured for themselves.

Complaint, ¶ 4.

The complaint, originally filed in the state court and removed to this Court by defendant Aurora National Life Assurance Company, Inc. ("Aurora"), asserts six causes of action against the defendants: (1) for intentional interference with economic expectancy; (2) for negligent interference with economic expectancy; (3) for abuse of process; and (4-6) three separate RICO violations.

This case is before the Court on the motion of Aurora, joined by co-defendant Credit Lyonnais S.A., to dismiss plaintiffs' complaint in its entirety for failure to state claims upon which relief can be granted. Aurora makes three primary arguments for dismissal. First, two California statutes and federal preemption law immunize defendants from liability for their alleged misrepresentations, because those statutes "focus[ ] any remedies where they belong—in administrative or criminal proceedings brought under the express provisions of the regulatory statutes at issue." Motion to Dismiss, p. 1. Second, as a matter of law disappointed bidders, like Sierra, cannot recover lost profits from the winner of a government contract, especially a contract which, as here, required judicial approval, because they cannot establish standing or any concrete injury. *Id.* at 2. Third, the

statute of limitations bars plaintiffs' suit because their own complaint asserts that as early as 1991, Sierra suspected that defendants' ownership structure precluded their eligibility to own the ELIC assets.

SUMMARY OF RULING

A. Immunity Defenses

1. California Insurance Code § 12919 does not immunize defendants from liability to Sierra.

2. As currently pled, California Civil Code § 47(b) does preclude Sierra from pursuing its California-based (as opposed to federal) claims. However, plaintiffs may amend their complaint if they can in good faith plead facts involving non-privileged conduct.

3. The Court does not find, on the current record, that *Buckman Co. v. Plaintiffs' Legal Committee* 531 U.S. 341, 121 S.Ct. 1012 (2001) preempts claims arising out of statements made to the Federal Reserve.

B. Defenses to State Law Claims Based on Standing and No Injury

The decisions in *Savini Construction v. Crooks Brothers Construction*, 540 F.2d 1355 (9th Cir.1974) and *Blank v. Kirwan*, 39 Cal.3d 311, 216 Cal.Rptr. 718 (1985) do not preclude plaintiffs from establishing standing.

C. RICO Claims

While the case defendants rely on most, *Imagineering v. Kiewit*, 976 F.2d 1303 (9th Cir.1992) does not preclude plaintiffs from alleging a RICO claim, other decisions establish that Sierra has not alleged, and probably cannot allege, injury to business or property within the meaning of RICO. Plaintiffs will be allowed to amend their claim, however, if they can do so in good faith.

D. Statute of Limitations

The November 12, 1991 memorandum creates no bar to plaintiffs' claims.

E. Other Claims

The claims for negligent interference with business expectancy and abuse of process are defective and must be dismissed with prejudice.

DISCUSSION

A. Immunity from Suit for Misrepresentations

1. California Insurance Code § 12919

Defendants assert that under California Insurance Code § 12919 plaintiffs' state and federal causes of action fail because all of defendants' alleged misrepresentations to the Commissioner respected facts concerning Aurora, then an applicant for an insurance license, and therefore "no proceeding" may "lie for" the alleged communications. California Insurance Code § 12919 provides that:

> [c]ommunications to the commissioner or any person in his office in respect to any fact concerning the holder of, or applicant for, any certificate or license issued under this code are made to him in official confidence within the meaning of Sections 1040 and 1041 of the Evidence Code. Liability shall not exist and no action or proceeding shall lie for or on account of any such communication or the making thereof, but the existence of such communication shall not be deemed to dispense with or nullify any requirement of notice, hearing or production of evidence before the commissioner as otherwise required by law.

Although plaintiffs allege that the defendants lied to the Commissioner about Aurora's true ownership structure under section 12919, defendants are not immune to suit for their alleged lies. The provision clearly applies to confidential

communications to the Commissioner about licensees and applicants, not false statements to the Commissioner by licensees and applicants about themselves. It was designed to encourage confidential communications to the Commissioner and immunize the maker of these communications from liability, such as for defamation, to the persons or businesses about whom the communication was made.

When the Section was first enacted, the Commissioner stated that it "[a]uthorizes confidential communications to [the] Commissioner re licensees or applicants for license, free of liability under libel and slander laws." *Sixty-Ninth Annual Report of the Insurance Commissioner of the State of California,* p. XXVII, ¶ 37 (1936) (Plaintiffs' Appendix of Authority). As plaintiffs point out, a statutory provision providing protection from suits for defamation cannot bar a suit against persons who told lies about themselves, because "the notion that Defendants . . . might sue themselves for defamation unless Section 12919 protects their falsehoods—is preposterous." Opposition, p. 10.

Defendants' sole authority for their contention that § 12919 precludes claims for fraud arising out of their communications is an opinion of the Legislative Counsel of California. 78 S.J. 14596 (1978). That opinion merely confirms that actions *for defamation* may not be brought based on communications to the Commissioner regarding licensees or applicants.

The first line of section 12919 defines "official confidence" by reference to Evidence Code sections 1040 and 1041. Both these provisions fall under Article 9 of the Evidence Code, entitled "Official Information and Identity of Informer," and section 1041 is the statutory provision that establishes the privilege to refuse to disclose the identity of informers. Section 12919's express reference to and reliance on statutory provisions protecting informers confirms that it is meant to encourage third party informers to communicate to the

Commissioner regarding license applicants or holders, and to protect them.

The final clause of § 12919 ("but the existence of such communication shall not be deemed to dispense with or nullify any requirement of notice, hearing or production of evidence before the Commissioner as otherwise required by law") confirms the statute's clear purpose. The clause mandates that although the communicator may not be sued, he may still be required to attend a hearing or produce evidence supporting his allegations, lest the Commissioner pursue an alleged wrongdoer without support.

Section 12919 falls under the Insurance Commissioner's "Powers and Duties" in the Insurance Code. Yet defendants' reading of the statute, which would preclude not only plaintiffs from suing defendants, but the Commissioner as well, would severely restrict, not fortify, the Commissioner's powers.

Plaintiffs correctly distill defendants' distortion of the section: "Defendants would turn a law intended to shield reports *of* wrongdoing into a shield *for* wrongdoing." Opposition, p. 10.

2. California Civil Code § 47(b)

Defendants assert that their alleged misrepresentations to the Conservation Court, the Commissioner and Sierra relating to the ELIC rehabilitation proceedings are absolutely privileged under California Civil Code § 47(b)(2). They also assert that under § 47(b)(3) their alleged misrepresentations in obtaining licenses and approvals from the Commissioner and the Federal Reserve are privileged. They argue, therefore, that

under § 47(b), all of plaintiffs' state law claims are barred.[2] California Civil Code § 47 provides in relevant part:

> A privileged publication or broadcast is one made:
>
> (a) In the proper discharge of an official duty.
>
> (b) In any (1) legislative proceeding, (2) judicial proceeding, (3) in any other official proceeding authorized by law, or (4) in the initiation or course of any other proceeding authorized by law and reviewable pursuant to Chapter 2 . . .

In *Silberg v. Anderson,* 50 Cal.3d 205 (1990), the California Supreme Court described the scope and rationale of this "litigation privilege."

> In furtherance of the public policy purposes it is designed to serve, the privilege prescribed by section 47(b) has been given broad application. Although originally enacted with reference to defamation, the privilege is now held applicable to any communication, whether or not it amounts to a publication, and all torts except malicious prosecution. Further, it applies to any publication required or permitted by law in the course of a judicial proceeding to achieve the objects of the litigation, even though the publication is made outside the courtroom and no function of the court or its officers is involved.
>
> The usual formulation is that the privilege applies to any communication (1) made in judicial or quasi-judicial proceedings; (2) by litigants or other participants authorized by law; (3) to achieve the objects of the litigation; and (4) that have some connection or logical relation to the action.

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[2] Defendants do not argue that the state law privilege under § 47 bars plaintiffs' federal RICO claims.

Silberg, 50 Cal.3d at 211-212 (internal citations omitted). The principal purpose of the privilege:

> is to afford litigants and witnesses the utmost freedom of access to the courts without fear of being harassed subsequently by derivative tort actions. Section 47(2) promotes the effectiveness of judicial proceedings by encouraging "open channels of communication and the presentation of evidence" in judicial proceedings. A further purpose of the privilege "is to assure utmost freedom of communication between citizens and public authorities whose responsibility is to investigate and remedy wrongdoing." . . . Since the "external threat of liability is destructive of this fundamental right and inconsistent with the effective administration of justice," courts have applied the privilege to eliminate the threat of liability for communications made during all kinds of truth-seeking proceedings: judicial, quasi-judicial, legislative and other official proceedings . . . Section 47(2) further promotes the effectiveness of judicial proceedings by encouraging attorneys to zealously protect their clients' interests. It is desirable to create an absolute privilege . . . not because we desire to protect the shady practitioner, but because we do not want the honest one to have to be concerned with [subsequent derivative] actions . . .
>
> Finally, in immunizing participants from liability for torts arising from communications made during judicial proceedings, the law places upon litigants the burden of exposing during trial the bias of witnesses and the falsity of evidence, thereby enhancing the finality of judgments and avoiding an unending roundelay of litigation, an evil far worse than an occasional unfair result . . .

Id. at 213-215 (internal citations omitted).

These pronouncements confirm that in California the litigation privilege is extremely broad. Plaintiffs nevertheless proffer four reasons why the § 47 privilege does not reach their allegations.

a. Conduct/Communication

First, Sierra contends that the litigation privilege applies only to statements, not conduct, and its claims all have an independent basis in defendants' conduct. Opposition, p. 12. Sierra argues that its claims for tortious interference would stand if defendants had made no misrepresentations, but simply submitted a bid they knew they could not lawfully perform and received assets they knew they could not legally possess . . ." and if defendants took "numerous intentional steps to promote their bid and prevent Sierra's bid from being accepted." Opposition, p. 7; Complaint, ¶ 94.

In short, Sierra contends that the fundamental wrong that defendants committed was to acquire ownership of ELIC's assets in violation of the Federal Bank Holding Company Act ("BHCA") and the California Insurance Code. Under Sierra's view, that defendants acquired such ownership through a years-long campaign of misrepresentations, lies and omissions allegedly made to the Conservation Court or as part of that court's proceedings is incidental.

However, defendants correctly state the law that "the absolute privilege of Section 47(b) applies where the gravamen of the plaintiff's complaint is communicative acts." Reply, p. 12. In *Rubin v. Green*, 4 Cal.4th 1187 (1993), the California Supreme Court applied the distinction between "communicative acts" and "noncommunicative conduct." Plaintiff alleged that the defendant law firm improperly:

> had engaged in a pattern of soliciting residents of several mobilehome parks for the purpose of commencing litigation against park owners. Allegedly, the firm's modus operandi was to arrange for an invitation to meet with park residents to help negotiate a resolution of complaints regarding park conditions with the owner; this, in turn, would lead to a promise by the firm to obtain substantial monetary settlements for those resi-

> dents who agreed to join in litigation against the owner. A lawsuit, preceded by a "form" notice of suit, followed.

Id. at 1192. The Court rejected plaintiff's argument that he had alleged acts-conduct-not communication, and thus his claims were not barred by the litigation privilege.

> Judging from the allegations of the amended complaint, plaintiff's claims, however styled, are founded essentially upon alleged misrepresentations made by the law firm (and Green) to Cedar Village residents . . . and the subsequent filing of pleadings in the lawsuit itself. Whether these acts amounted to wrongful attorney solicitation or not, they were communicative in their essential nature and therefore within the privilege of section 47(b).

Id. at 1196. Here, too, defendants' alleged wrongful acts, as delineated in plaintiffs' complaint, "were communicative in their essential nature." *See* Complaint ¶ 3 ("Based on defendants' misrepresentations, the Commissioner . . . accepted their bid for Executive Life."); *id.* at ¶ 49 ("Defendants repeatedly misrepresented to Sierra and others that no agreement such as the portage agreements existed. The false statements referenced in paragraphs 50-82 below are examples only and do not recount all of defendants' misrepresentations."). Indeed, according to the allegations it was those acts, those misrepresentations, which enabled defendants to injure Sierra. Would Sierra have sued these defendants if the "contrats de portage" had been disclosed and the Commissioner, the Conservation Court and the Federal Reserve Bank nevertheless had approved the Altus/MAAF bid?

Plaintiffs cannot avoid the application of § 47 on the basis that their claims, as alleged, challenge conduct as opposed to communications.

b. Non-Judicial Purpose and Non-Judicial Filings

Plaintiffs argue that "the litigation privilege does not apply to administrative filings made for 'dual purposes,' one judicial and one not." Opposition, p. 12. They rely exclusively on *Stacy & Witbeck v. City and County of San Francisco,* 36 Cal.App.4th 1074 (1995). In that case, a municipal contractor, Stacy, brought a Government Code claim seeking to recover losses caused by delay in work on a contract. Stacy stated that in detailing its damages claim, "[t]his letter represents an effort on our part to avoid litigation . . ." *Id.* at 475. The letter ultimately resulted in the Public Utilities Commission barring Stacy from receiving contracts, because the Commissioner determined the claim was false. Stacy sued, asserting the claim was privileged under § 47 because it was submitted in anticipation of litigation. Finding that Stacy had submitted the claim for dual purposes, one administrative and one to be able to pursue litigation, the Court framed the issue as "whether a publication filed for dual purposes is privileged in both the judicial and administrative arenas." *Id.* at 1090. The Court noted that "the privilege operates as a limitation on *civil liability* stemming from the protected communication" and stated that:

> To rule that the litigation privilege would bar administrative actions by public entities when the publication was submitted to the entity for a non-litigation purpose does not make sense. An agency should not be hamstrung from fulfilling its oversight duties simply because the target of the administrative action also contemplated litigation.

Id. at 1091. Therefore, "[t]o expand the statutory immunity to bar the use of otherwise privileged communications in disciplinary and related administrative proceedings reaches too far." *Id.*[3]

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[3] One federal district court has noted that "the California Supreme Court has not adopted the 'dual purpose' test in *Stacy*. Rather, California's

Stacy is of no real support to plaintiffs. The court there was explicitly intent on not expanding the scope of the § 47 bar to interfere with public agencies' rights to use administrative procedures to carry out their responsibilities, in that case a PUC action akin to a debarment proceeding. Here, there was no mere administrative proceeding, because all of defendants' communications were directed toward procuring the ELIC assets, which could only be done with the approval of the Conservation Court. Therefore, all of the statements have a logical relation to the Rehabilitation proceeding. *See Silberg*, 50 Cal.3d at 212. Indeed, as defendants point out, "as a conservator, the commissioner acts as a minister of the superior court in its statutory responsibility to protect the public interest and conserve the rights of the creditors and policyholders of the conservatee." *In re Pacific Standard Life Insurance Co.*, 9 Cal.App.4th 1197, 1201 (1992). To classify the filings before the Commissioner as administrative and deem them as wholly separate from the proceedings in the Conservation Court would be mistaken.[4]

Plaintiffs also point out that "many of Defendants' false statements were made in documents not filed in any court proceeding." Opposition, p. 13. However, the litigation privi-

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highest court requires only that a prelitigation communication have 'some relation to an anticipated lawsuit.'" *Nestle v. Virtual Integration Tech.*, 2000 W.L. 727859 (C.D.Cal.) (Pregerson, J.) (applying § 47(b)(2) privilege to prelitigation copyright application).

[4] This would not necessarily be the conclusion if § 47(b) had been asserted as a bar to the Commissioner's claims. Unlike Sierra, but like the Public Utilities Commission in *Stacy*, in managing the ELIC estate, the Commissioner carried out numerous administrative responsibilities that went beyond selling ELIC's assets, and defendants' alleged conduct interfered with those responsibilities. Moreover, on these motions (understandably enough) no party has briefed the question of whether as a matter of public policy the scope of § 47(b) should be narrowed when the plaintiff is an elected public official seeking to vindicate the rights of consumers and citizens.

lege "applies to any publication required or permitted by law in the course of a judicial proceeding to achieve the objects of the litigation, even though the publication is made outside the courtroom and no function of the court or its officers is involved." *Silberg,* at 212. Plaintiffs do not argue that these misrepresentations were not made to achieve the objects of the litigation or that they had no connection or logical relation to the action. *Id.* Thus, in this case and under those allegations, even misrepresentations made to the Commissioner or Sierra in the course of procuring a license would be covered by the privilege.

As to statements defendants made to the Federal Reserve Board, it is not clear from either the complaint or the parties' briefs how those alleged misrepresentations came to be made—*i.e.,* how the Board's involvement in enforcing the BHCA affects or implicates the analysis under § 47(b). It does appear, however, that those submissions were necessary, or at least helpful, in obtaining Rehabilitation Court approval. If so, state law claims based on the submissions would be subject to the same § 47(b) analysis.

c. Extrinsic Fraud

As plaintiffs state, the litigation privilege does not shield conduct amounting to "extrinsic fraud." *Silberg,* 50 Cal.3d at 214. "Extrinsic fraud" is a "narrowly circumscribed" exception to the application of § 47(b). A judgment has been obtained by extrinsic fraud where "'the aggrieved party [has been] deliberately kept in ignorance of the action or proceeding, or in some other way fraudulently prevented from presenting his claim or defense.'" *Moore v. Conliffe,* 7 Cal.4th 634 n. 5 (1994) (quoting 8 Witkin, California Procedure § 204 (3d ed.1985)). Examples of extrinsic fraud include: "Keeping the unsuccessful party away from the court by a false promise of a compromise, or purposely keeping him in ignorance of the suit; or, where an attorney fraudulently pretends to represent a party, and connives at his

defeat or, being regularly employed, corruptly sells out his client's interest." *Kimes v. Stone*, 84 F.3d 1121, 1127 (9th Cir.1996).

Plaintiffs provide insufficient basis to support a finding of extrinsic fraud. They quote from a brief the Commissioner evidently submitted to the Magistrate Judge in a discovery dispute in the related *Low v. Altus* case: "[d]efendants took great pains outside the Courtroom to insure that nobody inside the courtroom, *not even their own attorneys*, knew the truth." This is an allegation of intrinsic, not extrinsic, fraud. *See Kachig v. Boothe*, 22 Cal.App.3d 626, 634 (1971) ("in a litigated case the concealment or suppression of material evidence is held to constitute intrinsic fraud"); *Edwards v. Centex*, 53 Cal.App.4th 15, 41 (1997) ("Intrinsic fraud . . . is a fraud which goes to the merits of the litigation. Unlike 'extrinsic' fraud, it does not preclude any party from raising a claim or defense; nor does it prevent a party from knowing about or attending a proceeding.")

d. Litigation Privilege Summary

The foregoing analysis leads to the conclusion that Aurora's § 47(b) arguments are sound, although the Court is troubled that the result would be that an alleged fraudulent wrongdoer might escape state law-based liability to its victim. But this Court cannot skew its decision to avoid a troubling outcome. Nevertheless, and in any event, standard principles of pleading entitle Sierra to attempt to amend the complaint to allege state-based claims for relief that do not so directly and inextricably depend on or relate to privileged communications in the Conservation Court proceedings. Plaintiffs should evaluate very carefully whether it is feasible to do so. An amended complaint that basically and in a mechanical manner merely deleted references to the Conservation Court proceedings surely would invite a renewed, and probably meritorious, motion to dismiss.

3. Fraud on the Federal Reserve

Plaintiffs allege that defendants also made fraudulent statements to the Federal Reserve pursuant to their scheme. Complaint, ¶¶ 81-82. Defendants assert that under the reasoning of *Buckman Co. v. Plaintiffs' Legal Committee,* 531 U.S. 341, 121 S.Ct. 1012 (2001), plaintiffs are barred from pursuing state law claims to the extent they are premised on these allegations. In *Buckman,* the Supreme Court held that

> the plaintiffs' state-law fraud-on-the-FDA claims conflict with, and are therefore impliedly pre-empted by federal law. The conflict stems from the fact that the federal statutory scheme amply empowers the FDA to punish and deter fraud against the Agency, and that this authority is used by the Agency to achieve a somewhat delicate balance of statutory objectives. The balance sought by the Agency can be skewed by allowing fraud-on-the-FDA claims under state tort law.

Id. at 1017. Defendants argue that *Buckman* applies because: 1) under the BHCA, the Federal Reserve Board was authorized to require defendants' disclosures and has the power to investigate and remedy, through statutorily provided civil and criminal penalties, "any false or misleading report of information," 12 U.S.C. §§ 1844, 1813(q), 1818(b),(g),(i),(n), 1847(a),(d)(3); 2) the BHCA provides no private right of action and gives the Federal Reserve Board exclusive jurisdiction over BHCA issues; and 3) by seeking remedies not provided for in the statutes, plaintiffs' tort claims based on misrepresentations to the Federal Reserve Board "conflict" with the BHCA.

Plaintiffs respond, first, that "*Buckman* is limited to cases where state law liability is based entirely on violation of a federal statute. It applies only where the state law cause of action is nothing more than an added penalty for violation of federal law under the 'fraud on the agency' doctrine."

Opposition, p. 8. Here, the fraud on the Federal Reserve Board is alleged in an introductory portion of the complaint and incorporated into *all* of the ensuing claims for relief. So plaintiffs' argument does not deal with whether their claims are preempted *to the extent they allege violations of the BHCA.*

Plaintiffs' other argument is that *Buckman* does not apply to defendants' representations to entities other than the Federal Reserve Board, a proposition which defendants do not dispute.

Although it appears that the Federal Reserve Board does have powers of enforcement and that there is no private right of action for BHCA violations, it does not necessarily follow that conflict preemption applies. The *Buckman* court relied on several factors specifically applicable to the FDA, and defendants' analysis concerning the submissions to the Federal Reserve Board is too cursory to establish that a conflict exists. Because the record is incomplete, the Court declines to issue an opinion on the preemption issue. In any event, the Complaint does not allege an independent claim for relief based solely on alleged misrepresentations to the Federal Reserve. Moreover, to establish defendants' motive and intent for the allegedly secret agreements to disguise Credit Lyonnais's control, such facts would appear to be admissible.

B. Sierra's Standing and Injury (State Law Claims)

1. General Observations

Although this motion ostensibly challenges the sufficiency of a complaint, defendants have proffered a detailed history, supposedly supported by numerous exhibits, to establish a foundation for their arguments challenging Sierra's standing to sue. They contend that in late 1991 the Commissioner selected and the Conservation Court approved the Altus/MAAF bid because it was the best bid. And, they argue, in

large part it was the best bid because it provided for rehabilitation on a "bonds out" basis—*i.e.*, it enabled the Commissioner to sell the [mostly junk] bonds and thereby relieve the policyholders of the then-perceived great risk of default. Defendants quote the Commissioner, the Rehabilitation Court and the Court of Appeal to prove not only the superior merit of their proposal, but also that Sierra's "bonds-in" bid was unacceptable to the Commissioner and the courts. From all this, defendants reach their inexorable conclusion: that neither the Conservation Court nor the Commissioner would have accepted Sierra's bid. That being so, they argue, Sierra wasn't cheated out of anything; it never would have obtained the ELIC assets regardless of defendants' conduct.

Plaintiffs posit the background differently. Also pointing to evidence outside the complaint, they argue that the Commissioner had committed to sell the ELIC assets to Sierra if the Altus bid was unsuccessful and in fact he would have done so, had he known of the secret control allegedly exercised by Credit Lyonnais.

Both positions are flawed. The pronouncements to which defendants point were issued *after* the decision to award the deal to Altus/MAAF had been made; before that, the decision by no means had been inevitable. Although the Court perhaps *could* take judicial notice of these Conservation Court proceedings at the pleading stage, I decline to do so; too many facts and inferences are disputed. The issues require full briefings, such as on motions for summary judgment. (If, for example, there were admissible evidence from the Commissioner or the Conservation Court that undermined Sierra's contention that its bid would have been accepted, this case would have to be dismissed.). As to plaintiffs' argument, it fails to sufficiently appreciate the role of the Conservation Court. As stated in *In re Pacific Standard Life Ins. Co.*, 9 Cal.App.4th 1197, 1201 (1992): in insurance conservatorship proceedings, "[o]nly by express judicial authorization

and prescription of sales terms may a legally cognizable interest be created in any potential buyer in this statutory context." In *Pacific Standard Life,* the Insurance Commissioner, as conservator, petitioned the Superior Court for an order authorizing him to sell an asset to "LOA" on agreed-to terms. Thereafter, other bidders submitted a higher offer, which the Commissioner presented to the court. Over LOA's objection, the court authorized the sale to the later bidders. LOA appealed. The Court of Appeal held that LOA was not an aggrieved party and lacked standing to appeal. It stated that under the Insurance Code, as to sales of assets worth more than $20,000, the Superior Court, not the Commissioner "holds the exclusive authority . . . ." The court noted that "Indeed, had there been but a single offer, the court could have, in any event, rejected it." *Id.* at 1702.

For purposes of the State law claims, the Court construes the issue to be whether a disappointed bidder (Sierra) may maintain suit for lost profits against the successful bidder when the Commissioner had indicated a commitment to pick one of the two—although the Rehabilitation Court was not bound to approve either bid.

2. *Savini* and *Iconco*

Defendants argue that under state law, 1) plaintiffs have no property interest in the assets awarded to defendants and 2) their asserted injury is speculative. In addition to *In re Pacific Standard Life Insurance Co., supra,* defendants rely primarily on *Savini Construction v. Crooks Brothers Construction,* 540 F.2d 1355 (9th Cir.1974), for the proposition that a disappointed bidder may not sue for lost profits. In *Savini,* an unsuccessful bidder filed suit against the successful bidder, claiming conspiracy to misrepresent the successful bidder as a small business in order to obtain a canal construction project. Several months after the contract was awarded to the defendants, the Small Business Administration determined that defendants did not qualify as small

businesses; however, they were permitted to complete the project. Plaintiff brought suit to recover lost profits, overhead and punitive damages. The Ninth Circuit affirmed the district court's dismissal of plaintiff's suit on the ground that there is no private right of action under the Small Business Act.

In a footnote relied on by defendants, the Ninth Circuit stated that in any event lost profits were not available to plaintiff.

> Even were a cause of action to be inferred, an award of lost profits would be improper since a contract neither came into existence between plaintiff and the government, nor would have been certain to come into existence, but for the alleged wrongdoing of defendants. It is unchallenged in the instant case that plaintiff submitted the next lowest bid. However, numerous factors in addition to the amount of the bid are considered in determining the suitability of a particular bidder for a contract award. The contracting officer must consider, among other factors, the bidder's size, skill, financial condition, and capacity to perform the particular job. In fact, there is no assurance that the contract would have been awarded to any of the five remaining bidders had defendants been eliminated from the competition, since the contracting agency is free to reject all bids. It would therefore be impossible for the district court to determine with any certainty that the contract would have been awarded to plaintiff, and lost profits could thus not be the measure of damages in a suit against defendants. The proper measure of damages in such a suit would be the costs plaintiff incurred in preparing its bid.

Id. at 1359 n. 9 (internal citations omitted).

Plaintiffs correctly note that the language relied on by the defendants is dicta. They also attempt to distinguish *Savini* on the grounds that here the Commissioner had committed to

choosing either the defendants' or Sierra's bid. Complaint, ¶ 42. Whether that is factually correct is hotly disputed, but defendants have proffered no Ninth Circuit authority citing the *Savini* dicta, and certainly not for the proposition that under no set of facts could a second-place bidder ever establish by a preponderance of the evidence that it would have received the contract. Other cases have been allowed to proceed to trial on just that contention. *Iconco v. Jensen Construction Co.*, 622 F.2d 1291 (8th Cir.1980), is a good example. Iconco, the plaintiff, was the second lowest bidder on a small-business "set aside" contract let by the Corps of Engineers. Jensen, the low bidder, won the contract. Later, as a result of an unrelated inquiry, the Small Business Administration determined that Jensen did not qualify as a small business and so notified the Corps. Iconco learned about this development, protested to the Corps and demanded that Jensen relinquish the contract. Jensen refused. Iconco sued and prevailed at trial. On appeal, Jensen's primary argument was

> that an unsuccessful bidder on a small-business set-aside contract, as a matter of law, has no claim against the successful bidder who did not qualify as a small business.

Id. at 1294-95. Both parties agreed that under the Small Business Act there was no civil remedy for an unsuccessful bidder. So the question was whether under Iowa law Iconco stated a claim of unjust enrichment or fraud. Speaking for the court, Judge Arnold distinguished *Savini* as having dealt with whether a federal civil cause of action could be inferred from the Small Business Act,

> an issue which is not before us. To the extent, however, that [its] language . . . supports the conclusion that any private suit by an unsuccessful bidder against a successful one is inconsistent with Congressional intent and would jeopardize the proper administration of the

> government's contract procurement system, we respectfully disagree . . .

Id. at 1299. The court then turned to the issue of damages. It noted that as to the contract in question "the award of the contract to the low bidder, or to any bidder, is not automatic . . . [and] all bids may be rejected if the head of the agency determines that rejection is in the public interest." *Id.* at 1300. Judge Arnold then rejected Jensen's position, which was the same as defendants' here: "a claim for lost profits under these circumstances is speculative and improper." *Id.* He wrote,

> The more logical approach, in our view, is to put the unsuccessful bidder to its proof; if it proves by a preponderance of the evidence that it would have received the contract award absent the successful bidder's wrongdoing, we find no persuasive reasons why recovery should be denied.

Id. At trial, the individual who had the authority to award the contract had testified in response to a hypothetical question that the contract would have been awarded to the second lowest bidder. The Eighth Circuit concluded that this "opinion was proof sufficient to allow the jury to conclude that the . . . contract could have been awarded to Iconco had it not been awarded to Jensen." *Id.* at 1301.

This approach is sensible and fair. Whether Sierra needs to obtain the testimony of Judge Lewin (the Rehabilitation Court judge), and if so whether Sierra can obtain it (in light of the privilege afforded to judges against testifying about their decisions), are questions for another day.

3. *Blank v. Kirwan*

Next, defendants cite *Blank v. Kirwan,* 39 Cal.3d 311, 216 Cal.Rptr. 718 (1985) for the proposition that plaintiffs have not alleged and cannot allege the requisite "expectancy" for their claim for intentional interference with prospective economic advantage. In that case the plaintiff claimed he lost

the opportunity to profit from the operation of a poker club because the city officials who had the power to grant him the necessary license had conspired with rival bidders to grant the license to them, in return for various "things of value." The complaint failed to identify the other party to the alleged thwarted profitable economic relationship. If the other party was the City, said the Supreme Court, no action would lie because plaintiff and the City would not have had a joint economic relationship in the operation of the poker club. If the other party was the class of potential poker club patrons, ruled the Court, no claim could lie because "[i]n light of the city council's broad discretion to grant or deny a license application, plaintiff . . . can plead no protectable 'expectancy,' but at most a hope for an economic relationship. . . ." *Id.* at 330-31.

Blank v. Kirwan presents an issue quite similar to that presented in *Savini* and *Iconco:* when the plaintiff's contractual rights or economic benefits which were allegedly thwarted had not yet been established with finality, how likely—how certain?—must they be to permit recovery? In *Blank v. Kirwan* the Court sensibly found that plaintiff's prospects were just too "iffy." But throughout that opinion the California Supreme Court emphasized the specifics of the plaintiff's allegations, and the *Blank v. Kirwan* holding should not be applied too broadly. A multi-member City Council, such as that involved in *Blank v. Kirwan,* is routinely subject to a host of non-economic (as well as economic) pressures and considerations that are almost always present in municipal licensing and zoning decisions. Those factors exacerbate the inherent uncertainty in that governmental body's decision-making. Here, the public official initially involved in the key decision—the Commissioner—is alleged to have *committed* to selecting

either Sierra or the French Group. Complaint, ¶ 42.[5] While that allegation is disputed by defendants, and while the Court, not the Commissioner, had the final say, ¶ 42, and the other background facts alleged in the complaint make Sierra's complaint far less speculative than *Blank v. Kirwan.* For the reasons set forth in the preceding discussion about *Savini* and *Iconoco,* the Court rejects defendants' contentions.

C. RICO Claims

Defendants rely on *Imagineering v. Kiewit,* 976 F.2d 1303 (9th Cir.1992), to argue that Sierra lacks the standing and the concrete injury to assert its RICO claims. In *Imagineering,*

> [a] plaintiff class of minority and woman-owned business enterprises ("MWBEs") appeal[ed] the dismissal of its action against [various entities known as "Kiewit"], who are prime contractors, challenging an alleged scheme to evade federal and state regulations requiring prime contractors to employ MWBEs on public works construction projects by using phony MWBEs to create the appearance of compliance with the set-aside regulations. Plaintiffs alleged that the scheme violated the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act ("RICO") . . .

Id. at 1305. Plaintiffs alleged that 1) each named plaintiff was an MWBE subcontractor for the lowest complying contractor on at least one project improperly awarded to Kiewit and 2) they lost profits they would have earned as subcontractors on the projects due to Kiewit's illegal scheme. *Id.* at 1306. The Ninth Circuit separately evaluated whether plaintiffs had RICO standing and whether they could show

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[5] It is noteworthy that the Commissioner, whose counsel attended the hearing on their motions and addressed the Court, has not refuted this assertion, although in *Low v. Altus* the Commissioner has contended that he was under no compulsion to pick any of the bids that had been tendered and he could have continued to manage the ELIC estate.

proximate causation of their injuries and, affirming the district court, found against plaintiffs on both issues.

First, the court recited the RICO statutory standard: "any person injured in his business or property by reason of a violation of section 1962 of this chapter may sue therefor in any appropriate United States district court." *Id.* at 1309; 18 U.S.C. § 1964(c). The Court then stated that:

> [a]lthough plaintiffs characterize their injury as one compensable under RICO, that characterization must be challenged on several bases. First, the facts alleged do not establish "proof of concrete financial loss," let alone show that money was paid out as a result of Kiewit's alleged racketeering activity. Next, even if the type of injury alleged by the MWBEs could be compensable, it is not at all clear that these MWBEs suffered such an injury. Although plaintiffs assert that if specified contracts had not gone to Kiewit those contracts would have been awarded to the plaintiffs' prime contractors, that cannot be established. Indeed, although plaintiffs challenge the district court's reasoning that the next lowest bidder has no claim to the prime contract [under] Washington law . . . their complaint states that:
>
> > The City of Seattle first awarded the Cedar Falls Dam Contract in April 1986 to Morrison-Knudsen, which had designated plaintiff Knighten Brothers as an MBE subcontractor. Kiewit and Global successfully protested this award, and the contract was rebid. On the rebid, Kiewit submitted the low bid, designating Global as an MBE subcontractor.
>
> Even if we assume that the MWBE plaintiffs' prime contractors would have received the contracts and they were obligated to award Imagineering and Knighten Brothers the subcontracting work merely on the basis of "designating" them in the bids, there is no guarantee that the WBE or MBE subcontractor chosen would not be substituted during the pendency of the contract.

> Finally, the complaint does not allege specific bids submitted by the MWBE plaintiffs that were accepted by the prime contractors. It is impossible to determine from the amended complaint whether the plaintiffs are claiming loss of opportunity to realize profits or loss of specific identifiable profits. *Considered as a whole, the amended complaint alleges only a speculative injury, which is not compensable under RICO. Thus, plaintiffs have failed to establish RICO standing; namely that they were injured in their business by reason of Kiewit's conduct.*

Id. at 1310-11 (emphasis added).

Next, for similar reasons, the Ninth Circuit found that plaintiffs had not alleged proximate causation of their injuries.

> In order to maintain a cause of action under RICO then, the plaintiff must show not only that the defendant's violation was a "but for" cause of his injury, but that it was the proximate cause as well . . . This requires that there must be a direct relationship between the injury asserted and the injurious conduct alleged.

Id. at 1311 (internal citations and quotations omitted). The Court opined that under that standard,

> The direct harm in this case runs to the prime contractors. It was the intervening inability of the prime contractors to secure the contracts that was the direct cause of plaintiffs' injuries. Under *Holmes*, the MWBE plaintiffs are missing the direct relationship needed to show Kiewit proximately caused their injuries.[6]

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[6] The parties do not sufficiently address the RICO proximate cause requirement. *See Holmes v. Securities Investor Protection Corp.*, 503 U.S. 258 (1992), where the Supreme Court discussed three reasons for the directness requirement.

Id. at 1312. The court concluded that:

> Because the MWBE plaintiffs did not adequately allege RICO standing or RICO proximate causation, the district court's Rule 12(b)(6) dismissal of the RICO claims must be affirmed. Plaintiffs' RICO claims were properly dismissed on either ground.

Id.

Defendants assert that *Imagineering*'s standing analysis applies because just as Washington law permitted the awarding agency in *Imagineering* to reject all bids and readvertise, "[h]ere, not only could the Commissioner have rejected a single bidder and required rebidding under Ins.Code § 1037 (for example, for additional bonds-out bids, albeit at a lower price than Altus paid), so could the Conservation Court." Motion, p. 15-16.

Plaintiffs seek to restrict *Imagineering* to its facts. They emphasize that "[i]n that case, the court upheld the dismissal of a RICO claim by a disappointed bidder on the ground that the plaintiff was not a competitor of the successful bidder but rather a prospective *subcontractor* of the bidder who had lost out as a result of the defendant's wrongful conduct." Opposition, p. 15. Plaintiffs rely on *Pharmacare v. Caremark*, 965 F.Supp. 1411 (D.Haw.1996), to support this distinction. In *Pharmacare*, plaintiffs alleged that defendants had engaged in a scheme of commercial bribery in violation of RICO by paying doctors for referrals and that, but for their scheme, plaintiffs would have received those referrals and the resulting profits. The court held that plaintiffs asserted a "first-tier injury," distinguishing *Imagineering* on the ground that the plaintiffs there had asserted only a "second-tier" injury. *Id.* at 1420-21.

To support its finding that plaintiffs had no standing, the *Imagineering* court pointed to four problems with their allegations: 1) no proof of concrete financial loss, much less

that money was paid out as a result of Kiewit's alleged racketeering activity; 2) plaintiffs could not establish that their prime contractors would have received the contracts absent defendants' fraud, because the awarding agency could have rejected all the bids; 3) no guarantee that even if the plaintiffs would have been chosen as subcontractors they would not be substituted during the pendency of the contract; and 4) the complaint did not allege specific bids submitted by the MWBE plaintiffs that were accepted by the prime contractors. *Id.* at 1310-11. The *Imagineering* court did not hold that each of the factors it relied on independently compelled dismissal; instead, "[c]onsidered as a whole, the amended complaint alleges only a speculative injury, which is not compensable under RICO." *Id.* at 1311.

Imagineering does not compel finding as a matter of law that plaintiffs' asserted injury is too speculative to be redressed. Only two of the factors present in that case, one and two, apply here. Nevertheless, just because *Imagineering* does not compel the court to find that plaintiffs have not pled a non-speculative injury does not mean they have pled an injury cognizable under RICO. RICO plaintiffs must allege injury to their "business or property." 18 U.S.C. § 1964(c). While *Imagineering* focused primarily on whether the plaintiff MWBE's had suffered any injury at all, here there remains the question of whether the injury allegedly suffered was of the type compensable under RICO. *Id.* at 1310-11.

[*Injury to Business or Property*]

Plaintiffs have not clarified whether they are alleging injury to "business" or "property." Although the distinction has not been adequately briefed, the Court proffers its view that plaintiffs cannot properly plead either.

In determining whether a particular interest is a property right for RICO purposes, courts look to whether the law has recognized and enforced it as a property right. *Carpenter v.*

United States, 484 U.S. 19, 26 (1987) (finding confidential business information to be property because it "has long been recognized as property"); *United States v. Henry,* 29 F.3d 112, 115 (3d Cir.1994) ("to determine whether a particular interest is property for purposes of the fraud statutes, we look to whether the law traditionally has recognized and enforced it as a property right"); *United States v. Evans,* 844 F.2d 36, 42 (2d Cir.1988) ("[t]hat the right at issue here has not been treated as a property right in other contexts, and that there are many basic differences between it and common-law property are relevant considerations in deciding whether the right is property under the federal fraud statutes").

Sierra's interest, as a disappointed bidder, in the ELIC assets awarded to defendants does not appear to be a legally cognizable property interest. The authority most directly on point suggests that a disappointed bidder's interest in assets awarded to another bidder during insurance conservation proceedings is not legally cognizable property. *Pacific Standard, supra,* 9 Cal.App.4th at 1201, ("[o]nly by express judicial authorization and prescription of sales terms may a legally cognizable interest be created in any potential buyer in this statutory context. [The disappointed bidder, though it alleged that the Commissioner had committed to award it the assets] never attained that status and was no more than an offeror"). Moreover, cases expressly addressing whether, under RICO, disappointed bidders have property interests in assets awarded to others or in an uncorrupted bidding process, indicate that they do not. In *United States v. Henry,* 29 F.3d 112, 114-115 (3d Cir.1994), for example, the court dismissed an indictment alleging a RICO fraud based on the theory that public officials had corruptly steered deposits to one bank, thereby victimizing competing banks. The court stated,

> once the Commission's deposits actually were awarded to one of the bidding banks, they legally would be considered the property of that bank . . . Here, however,

> the money had not yet been deposited, and there is no way of knowing to which, if any, of the bidding banks it would have gone. Even in a fair process, Bank, A [the bank which actually received the deposits] might still have won the deposits. The issue, therefore, is whether the competing banks' interest in having a fair opportunity to bid for something that would become their property if and when it were received is in itself property. We conclude that it is not. The competing banks' interest in a fair bidding opportunity does not meet [the test of whether the law traditionally has recognized the particular interest as property.] Clearly, each bidding bank's chance of receiving property . . . was, at least in part, dependent on the condition that the bidding process would be fair. . . . Violation of this condition may have affected each bidding bank's possible future receipt of property, but that does not make the condition property.

Id. at 114-115. In light of the cited authorities, the Court agrees with the statement made by the Court in *United States v. Berlin,* 707 F.Supp. 832, 835 (E.D. Va 1989), that "[i]t seems intuitively obvious that other companies, whoever they may be, have no cognizable property interest in the mere expectation of a contract that the government may award to any or none of them."

Concerning the remaining prong of section 1964(c), as a matter of common sense Sierra would appear to be restricted from asserting an "injury to business," because Sierra has conceded that it was not an ongoing concern prior to the ELIC conservation proceedings, but was instead formed solely to pursue the ELIC assets.

Given the foregoing analysis, the Court rules that as currently framed the RICO claims must be dismissed. Plaintiffs may attempt to amend them, but only if they can in

good faith succeed in framing allegations that do not run afoul of the cases and principles discussed in this section.[7]

D. Statute of Limitations

Defendants argue that all plaintiffs' claims are barred by the applicable statutes of limitation because the complaint shows they were on notice of defendants' allegedly illegal ownership structure as of 1991.

Plaintiffs allege that "[o]n November 12, 1991, Sierra sent a memorandum to the Commissioner raising concerns that Altus and Credit Lyonnais might in fact be controlling MAAF and the other entities that allegedly would be purchasing and operating Executive Life's business." Complaint, ¶ 55. Based on this pleading and the referenced memorandum, defendants argue that plaintiffs were on notice of the alleged wrongdoing as of the date of the memo. Plaintiffs contend that defendants "overcame [plaintiffs'] suspicions by a campaign of lies and deceptions" and that in fact the Commissioner determined—albeit mistakenly—that plaintiffs' suspicions were "groundless," and rebuked "self-appointed regulators" for "attempt[ing] to second guess" him. Opposition, p. 20; Complaint, ¶ 69. The issue, therefore, is whether the statutes of limitation bar claims when the plaintiff was suspicious of wrongdoing but those suspicions were allayed by the fraudulent concealment of defendants.

Defendants cite California cases addressing the doctrine of inquiry notice. "[T]he statute of limitations begins to run when the plaintiff suspects or should suspect that her injury

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[7] The Court acknowledges that there is an apparent tension between permitting the intentional interference claim to proceed and provisionally dismissing the RICO claims. However, there are important differences between the statutory language of RICO ("business or property") and the common law development of legal rights based on an "expectancy." Linguistically and practically, the latter phase contemplates something less concrete than the former.

was caused by wrongdoing . . . So long as suspicion exists, it is clear that the plaintiff must go find the facts; she cannot wait for the facts to find her." *Jolly v. Eli Lilly,* 44 Cal.3d 1103, 1110-11 (1988); *California Sansome v. U.S. Gypsum,* 55 F.3d 1402, 1409 n. 12 (9th Cir.1995) ("The doctrine of fraudulent concealment [for the tolling of the statute of limitations] does not come into play, whatever the lengths to which a defendant has gone to conceal the wrongs, [if] a plaintiff is on notice of a potential claim."). A plaintiff "has reason to discover the cause of action when he has reason at least to suspect a factual basis for its elements." *Norgart v. Upjohn Co.,* 21 Cal.4th 383, 398 (1999). A plaintiff "has reason to suspect when he has notice or information of circumstances to put a reasonable person on inquiry." *Id.*

Although Sierra's memo suggests suspicion, it would be inappropriate at the pleading stage to dismiss Sierra's claims on that basis. First, plaintiffs had no knowledge of the *contrats de portage,* which is the central basis for their claims and which plaintiffs allege defendants assiduously concealed. Plaintiffs' objection, as a competing bidder, to defendants' bid was based purely on the structure of defendants' proposed deal; what was proposed was not itself illegal and plaintiffs could not have filed a meritorious suit challenging it. Moreover, according to plaintiffs' allegations, defendants immediately responded to plaintiffs' concerns. So did the Commissioner, who rebuked plaintiffs. *See Conmar Corp. v. Mitsui,* 858 F.2d 499, 504-05 (9th Cir.1988) (criminal indictment of defendant not sufficient to "excite inquiry." Moreover, "it would not have been unreasonable for Conmar to rely upon Mitsui's contention that the customs investigation was a mistake."). Under these circumstances, it is not clear that plaintiffs were obligated (or even able) to go over the Commissioner's head when they did not know about the *contrats de portage* which form the basis of their suit. Had plaintiffs sued for fraud based merely on suspicions they

might have invited sanctions—or at least defendants likely would have so contended.

E. Other Claims

1. Negligent Interference with Business Expectancy

Defendants assert that plaintiffs cannot state a cause of action for negligent interference with business expectancy because, as competitors for the ELIC assets, defendants owed plaintiffs no duty of care. *Stolz v. Wong Communications*, 25 Cal.App.4th 1811, 1825 (1994) ("complaint did not allege such a duty, nor could it, since it was plain that plaintiff and defendants were competitors"). Plaintiffs do not address *Stolz*, but instead rely on language from the California Supreme Court's seminal case on negligent interference, *J'aire Corp. v. Gregory*, 24 Cal.3d 799 (1979).[8] That case stated that "[w]hether a duty is owed is simply a shorthand way of phrasing . . . the essential question [of] whether the plaintiff's interests are entitled to legal protection against the defendant's conduct." *Id.* at 803. The Court also asserted that "[r]ather than traditional notions of duty, this court has focused on foreseeability as the key component necessary to establish liability." *J'aire* announced a six-factor test for determining duty: 1) the extent to which defendant's conduct was intended to harm plaintiff, 2) the foreseeability of the harm, 3) the certainty that plaintiff actually suffered harm, 4) the closeness of the connection between the conduct and the harm, 5) the moral blame attached to defendant's conduct and 6) the policy of preventing future harm. *Id.* at 804. A mechanical application and weighing of those factors could warrant a finding of duty here, but that would expand the theoretical scope of this tort far beyond its sensible boundaries. Not only were Sierra and defendants (at least the MAAF and Aurora parties) competitors, but they also did not have any kind of dependence on the other's conduct to carry

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[8] *Stolz* fails to analyze duty under *J'aire*.

on their own respective business—unlike the lessee's dependence on the contractor finishing on time in *J'Aire*. There being no "duty" (from either a practical or legal perspective), the negligence claim cannot survive. *See Limandri v. Judkins*, 52 Cal.App. 4th 326, 60 Cal.Rptr.2d 539, 551 (1997).

2. Abuse of Process

Defendants argue that plaintiffs' abuse of process claim is clearly barred by the one year statute of limitations because plaintiffs' complaint establishes that they knew of the basis for this claim on February 18, 1999 (the date the Commissioner publicized the existence of the *contrats de portage*) but did not file their claim until January 30, 2001. Plaintiffs respond that the statute of limitations has not begun to run on its abuse of process claim because defendants' wrongful conduct in the Conservation Court is ongoing. But plaintiffs' complaint does not allege any ongoing wrongful conduct. The statute of limitations bars this claim.

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, the Court GRANTS defendants' motion to dismiss plaintiffs' first cause of action (intentional interference with business expectancy) and plaintiffs' third, fourth and fifth causes of action (RICO), with leave to amend.

For the foregoing reasons, the Court GRANTS with prejudice defendants' motion to dismiss plaintiffs' second cause of action (negligent interference with business expectancy) and plaintiffs' sixth cause of action (abuse of process).

IT IS SO ORDERED.

APPENDIX D

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

[Filed May 6, 2003]

No. 02-55193
D.C. No. CV-01-01339-AHM
Central District of California, Los Angeles

SIERRA NATIONAL INSURANCE HOLDINGS, INC.;
GEORGIA LEE, as Receiver for Sierra National Insurance Holdings, Inc.,
Plaintiffs - Appellees,

v.

CREDIT LYONNAIS S. A.,
Defendant,

and,

NEW CALIFORNIA LIFE HOLDINGS, INC.; AURORA NATIONAL LIFE ASSURANCE COMPANY,
Defendants - Appellants.

No. 02-55259
D.C. No. CV-01-01339-AHM
Central District of California, Los Angeles

SIERRA NATIONAL INSURANCE HOLDINGS, INC.;
GEORGIA LEE, as Receiver for Sierra National Insurance Holdings, Inc.,
Plaintiffs - Appellants,

v.

CREDIT LYONNAIS S. A.,
Defendant,

and,

NEW CALIFORNIA LIFE HOLDINGS, INC.; AURORA NATIONAL LIFE ASSURANCE COMPANY,
Defendants - Appellees.

Before: B. FLETCHER and HAWKINS; Circuit Judges, and BURY, District Judge.*

The panel voted to deny the Petition for Rehearing. Judges B. Fletcher and Bury recommended denying the Petition for Rehearing En Banc. Judge Hawkins voted to deny the En Banc Petition.

The full court was advised of the Petition for Rehearing En Banc and no Judge requested a vote on whether to rehear the matter en banc. Fed. R. App. P. 35.

The Petition for Rehearing and the Petition for Rehearing En Banc are DENIED.

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* The Honorable David C. Bury, United States District Judge for the District of Arizona, sitting by designation.

Supreme Court, U.S.
FILED
SEP 8 _ 2003
OFFICE OF THE CLERK

No. 03-187

IN THE

Supreme Court of the United States

AURORA NATIONAL LIFE ASSURANCE COMPANY and NEW CALIFORNIA LIFE HOLDINGS, INC.,

Petitioners,

v.

SIERRA NATIONAL INSURANCE HOLDINGS, INC. and GEORGIA LEE, as Receiver for SIERRA NATIONAL INSURANCE HOLDINGS, INC.,

Respondents.

ON PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

BRIEF IN OPPOSITION

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RULE 29.6 STATEMENT

Sierra National Insurance Holdings, Inc. has no parent corporation and is privately held. No publicly held company owns 10% or more of its stock.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Rule 29.6 Statement	i
Table of Contents	ii
Table of Cited Authorities	iii
Statement of the Case	1
A. Sierra's Claim For Tortious Interference With Its Business Expectancy.	1
B. The District Court Denies Aurora's Motion To Dismiss Sierra's Complaint For Lack of Standing.	4
C. Aurora's Interlocutory Appeal.	5
Reasons for Denying the Petition	8
I. As The District Court Held, Sierra Has Alleged Facts Sufficient To Confer Standing To Sue And Any Further Challenge To Its Standing Turns On The Resolution Of Disputed Facts.	9
II. This Case Is Not Ripe For Review.	17
III. The Unpublished Decision Below Creates No Conflict, Much Less One Sufficient To Justify Review.	18
Conclusion	22

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Page

Cases:

Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Mineta, 534 U.S. 103 (2001) 9

Amer. Constr. Co. v. Jacksonville, T. & K. W. Ry. Co., 148 U.S. 372 (1893) 17

Amer. Tel. & Tel. Co. v. Cent. Office Tel., Inc., 524 U.S. 214 (1998) 12

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Bennett v. Spear, 520 U.S. 154 (1997) 12

Bhd. of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, et al. v. Bangor & Aroostook R.R. Co., et al., 389 U.S. 327 (1967) 17

Bieter Co. v. Bloomquist, 987 F.2d 1319 (8th Cir. 1993) 13

Carringer v. Tessemer, 253 F.3d 1322 (11th Cir. 2001) 6

Cited Authorities

	Page
Catlin v. United States, 324 U.S. 229 (1945)	6, 18
Devlin v. Scardelletti, 536 U.S. 1 (2002)	9, 11
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Haddle v. Garrison, 525 U.S. 121 (1998)	11
Hart v. Massanari, 266 F.3d 1155 (9th Cir. 2001)	21
Iconco v. Jensen Const. Co., 622 F.2d 1291 (8th Cir. 1980)	5, 13
In re Executive Life Ins. Co., 32 Cal. App. 4th 344 (1995)	2
In Re Pacific Standard Life Ins. Co., 9 Cal. App. 4th 1197 (1992)	13, 14
Korea Supply Co. v. Lockheed Martin Corp., 29 Cal. 4th 1134 (2003)	15
Kyocera Corp. v. Prudential-Bache Trade Services, Inc., 2003 WL 22025130, __ F.3d __ (9th Cir. Aug. 29, 2003)	20
Magnum Import Co. v. Coty, 262 U.S. 159 (1923)	19
Meredith v. Oregon, 321 F.3d 807 (9th Cir. 2003)	20, 21

Cited Authorities

Page

Merritt v. Shuttle, Inc., 187 F.3d 263 (2d Cir. 1999) 7, 19, 20, 21

Moniz v. City of Fort Lauderdale, 145 F.3d 1278 (11th Cir. 1998) 21

Ross v. Moffitt, 417 U.S. 600 (1974) 19

Ruhrgas AG v. Marathon Oil Co., 526 U.S. 574 (1999) 11

Sell v. United States, 123 S. Ct. 2174 (2003) 10

Steel Co. v. Citizens for a Better Env't, 523 U.S. 83 (1998) 6-7, 20

Summit Med. Assocs., P.C. v. Pryor, 180 F.3d 1326 (11th Cir. 1999) 21

Swint v. Chambers County Commission, 514 U.S. 35 (1995) 7

Terminate Control Corp. v. Horowitz, 28 F.3d 1335 (2d Cir. 1994) 13

Timpanogos Tribe v. Conway, 286 F.3d 1195 (10th Cir. 2002) 19, 20, 21

United States v. Virginia, 518 U.S. 515 (1996) 17

Utah v. Evans, 536 U.S. 452 (2002) 9

Cited Authorities

Page

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Vermont Agency of Natural Res. v. United States ex rel. Stevens, 529 U.S. 765 (2000) 6, 7, 8, 18, 19, 20, 21

Warth v. Seldin, 422 U.S. 490 (1975) 12

Statutes:

Bank Holding Company Act, 12 U.S.C. § 1841, *et seq.* 3

California Code of Civil Procedure § 902 13

Rules:

Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6) 1, 4

Ninth Circuit Rule 36-1 1

Ninth Circuit Rule 36-3(a) 1, 7, 20

Ninth Circuit Rule 36-3(b) 7, 8, 20

U.S. Sup. Ct. R. 10 8

Treatise:

Robert L. Stern et al., *Supreme Court Practice* (8th ed. 2002) 10, 11, 19

Respondents Sierra National Insurance Holdings, Inc. and Georgia Lee, as Receiver for Sierra National Insurance Holdings, Inc. (collectively, "Sierra"), respectfully request that the Court deny the Petition for Writ of Certiorari ("Petition" or "Pet.") filed by Petitioners Aurora National Life Assurance Company and New California Life Holdings, Inc. (collectively, "Aurora") regarding a footnote in an unpublished decision on Aurora's interlocutory appeal.[1]

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

A. Sierra's Claim For Tortious Interference With Its Business Expectancy.

Sierra was the alternate winner of an auction held by California Insurance Commissioner John Garamendi ("the Commissioner") for the rehabilitation of Executive Life Insurance Company ("ELIC"). But for a massive fraud perpetrated by Aurora and the other defendants, at least two of whom were recently indicted on federal criminal charges arising from that fraud, Sierra would have prevailed at the auction and today would own ELIC. C.A. App. 233 ¶ 6.[2]

1. Aurora misspeaks when it refers to the decision below as an "opinion" (Pet. 1, 2); the decision below is designated as a "Memorandum." In the Ninth Circuit, all "opinions" are published; all "memoranda," like the one below, are unpublished and "are not binding precedent." *See* Ninth Circuit Rules 36-1 & 36-3(a).

2. "C.A. App." refers to the Excerpts of Record filed in the Ninth Circuit. Since Aurora's interlocutory appeal challenged the denial of its Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6) motion to dismiss, the only relevant facts are those contained in Sierra's First Amended Complaint ("Complaint"). *See* C.A. App. 232-266. Aurora's Statement of the Case relies on numerous documents produced in discovery, all of which should be disregarded by this Court.

The auction for ELIC, which was announced shortly after the Commissioner seized control of ELIC in April 1991, generated a total of eight bids, including Sierra's. C.A. App. 237-38 ¶¶ 36-41 & 240 ¶ 45. The Commissioner promptly rejected all but three bidders: Sierra, a French syndicate that included the defendants in this case,[3] and an entity known by its acronym, NOLHGA. C.A. App. 240 ¶ 47.

Initially, the Commissioner conditionally accepted NOLHGA's bid. C.A. App. 240 ¶ 47. His "Selection of Bidder," and the confirming order of the Rehabilitation Court, both provided, however, that if NOLHGA failed to satisfy a list of conditions by a date certain, then he "was obligated" to sell ELIC either to Sierra or to defendants. *Id.*

In November 1991, the Commissioner rejected NOLHGA's bid for failure to meet his conditions. He invited Sierra and defendants to submit renewed bids, reaffirming that he would select either one or the other, and so stipulated to the Rehabilitation Court. C.A. App. 240-41 ¶ 48. As the California Court of Appeal determined in reviewing challenges to the Commissioner's plan for the rehabilitation of ELIC, the Commissioner "narrowed the bidders to [defendants] and Sierra." *In re Executive Life Ins. Co.*, 32 Cal. App. 4th 344, 363 (1995).[4]

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3. The members of the French syndicate who are defendants in Sierra's action are Credit Lyonnais S.A., Altus Finance S.A., CDR Enterprises, MAAF Assurances, MAAF Vie S.A., Omnium Geneve S.A., Consortium de Realisation S.A., Jean-Francois Henin, and Jean Irigoin. Aurora conspired with the French syndicate and was the vehicle for the syndicate's illegal acquisition of ELIC.

4. By referring to Sierra as nothing more than "a disappointed bidder" and "[o]ne of the eight bidders," Aurora's Statement of the Case misstates the status of Sierra's bid. *See* Pet. 2-3. Sierra has alleged and will prove at trial that it was the alternate winner for ELIC.

Unknown to everyone but defendants, defendants' bid was illegal. They had entered into secret agreements, known as *contrats de portage*, under which control of ELIC passed to defendant Credit Lyonnais, a bank owned by the French government. C.A. App. 241-42 ¶¶ 51-55. Their acquisition therefore violated Section 699.5 of the California Insurance Code prohibiting agencies of foreign governments from acquiring ownership or control of a California insurer. C.A. App. 241, 246 ¶¶ 51, 82. It also violated the federal Bank Holding Company Act, 12 U.S.C. § 1841, *et seq.*, which severely restricted any control of insurers by banks. C.A. App. 241 ¶ 51.

Defendants knew their actions were illegal. Indeed, to conceal what they had done, they falsely denied the existence of the illegal *portage* agreements in statement after statement to the Commissioner, the Rehabilitation Court, the Federal Reserve, Sierra and others. C.A. App. 244-54 ¶ 71-111. As one of their own lawyers has admitted: "[They] lied to this [Rehabilitation] Court, lied to their advisors, lied to everyone." Supp. C.A. App. 1474 n.2.[5]

Unaware of the illegality of defendants' bid, the Commissioner selected it. C.A. App. 241 ¶ 49. Had he known the truth, he would not — indeed could not — have done so, but would instead have sold ELIC to Sierra as he committed to do. C.A. App. 240-41 ¶ 48. From that acquisition Sierra would have realized profits at least as great as the $2 billion defendants garnered. C.A. App. 241 ¶ 50. Even after the Commissioner had selected defendants' bid, Sierra's bid remained a standby bid; Sierra was ready, willing and able to perform its obligations under its bid. C.A. App. 241 ¶ 49. Sierra's owners and directors had experience and national reputations for managing insurance

5. Supp. C.A. App. refers to the Supplemental Excerpts of Record filed in the Ninth Circuit.

companies and high yield bond portfolios. C.A. App. 239 ¶ 42-43. They spent millions of dollars for actuaries, accountants, attorneys and other professionals in support of Sierra's bid, and incurred large expenses for the work of the directors, senior officers and other employees. *Id.*

Defendants' criminal activity might never have come to light had not a French whistleblower revealed the existence of the illegal *portage* agreements in late 1998. The Commissioner then sued defendants for the fraud practiced upon him. C.A. App. 255 ¶ 113. Sierra subsequently sued defendants for the independent injury to Sierra caused by defendants' intentional and illegal interference with Sierra's reasonable expectation of acquiring ELIC. C.A. App. 232-266.

B. The District Court Denies Aurora's Motion To Dismiss Sierra's Complaint For Lack of Standing.

Aurora twice moved to dismiss Sierra's Complaint pursuant to Rule 12(b)(6) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, resulting in the two District Court opinions appended to Aurora's Petition. *See* Appendix to Aurora's Petition for Writ of Certiorari ("Pet. App.") 5a-57a. The District Court held that Sierra had standing to proceed with its claims under California law for intentional interference with prospective economic advantage. Pet. App. 40a-47a.

The District Court first recognized that Aurora's challenge to Sierra's standing was predicated on the introduction of evidence purporting to contradict the allegations in Sierra's Complaint. Pet. App. 40a ("Although this motion ostensibly challenges the sufficiency of a complaint, defendants have proffered a detailed history, supposedly supported by numerous exhibits, to establish a foundation for their arguments challenging

Sierra's standing to sue."). The District Court refused to take judicial notice of any of Aurora's proffered evidence, explaining that "too many facts and inferences are disputed. The issues require full briefings, such as on motions for summary judgment." Pet. App. 41a.

Thus, the District Court accepted Sierra's allegations as true and addressed the merits of Aurora's standing argument. Pet. App. 41a-47a. The District Court held that none of Aurora's legal authorities deprived Sierra of standing to proceed with its intentional interference claims, explaining that Aurora had no authority "for the proposition that under no set of facts could a second-place bidder ever establish by a preponderance of the evidence that it would have received the contract." Pet. App. 44a. The Court adopted the reasoning of *Iconco v. Jensen Const. Co.*, 622 F.2d 1291, 1300 (8th Cir. 1980): a bidder in Sierra's shoes should be put "to its proof" because "if it proves by a preponderance of the evidence that it would have received the contract award absent the successful bidder's wrongdoing, we find no persuasive reasons why recovery should be denied." Pet. App. 43a-45a. In *Iconco*, the Eighth Circuit affirmed a jury verdict for a second place bidder against the winning bidder where the winning bidder prevailed by defrauding the agency awarding the contract. 622 F.2d at 1300-01. The District Court accordingly held that, like the plaintiff in *Iconco*, Sierra had standing to attempt to prove its allegations by a preponderance of the evidence. Pet. App. 45a.

C. Aurora's Interlocutory Appeal.

Aurora declined to accept the District Court's invitation to prepare "full briefings" or "motions for summary judgment" on the standing issue. It has had every opportunity to do so because discovery and motion practice has continued unabated since the

District Court determined that Sierra had adequately alleged standing in June 2001. In the more than two years of litigation since that decision dozens of depositions have been taken, written discovery and document productions have continued, and the District Court has resolved many pre-trial motions. Two of Sierra's principals are scheduled to be deposed by Aurora and the other defendants by the end of October 2003. Most recently, published news reports have established that at least two defendants — Credit Lyonnais S.A. and Consortium de Realisation S.A. — have been indicted on federal criminal charges for their illegal actions in connection with ELIC. That sealed indictment has resulted in an agreement by those defendants to plead guilty to one or more charges and to pay more than $450 million in fines and restitution, one of the largest financial penalties in U.S. history.

While continuing its active litigation in the District Court, Aurora filed an interlocutory appeal with the Ninth Circuit. Aurora's appeal focused not on Sierra's standing, but rather on Aurora's claim that its numerous falsehoods were protected under California's litigation privilege. Indeed, the sole basis for interlocutory review was the privilege issue, not Sierra's standing. The denial of a motion to dismiss for lack of standing is not subject to interlocutory review. *See Catlin v. United States*, 324 U.S. 229, 236 (1945) ("[D]enial of a motion to dismiss, even when the motion is based upon jurisdictional grounds, is not immediately reviewable."); *Carringer v. Tessemer*, 253 F.3d 1322, 1323 (11th Cir. 2001) ("[T]he question of standing does not fit within the collateral order doctrine . . . .").

Aurora apparently did little research on the standing issue, as it did not cite the cases on which it relies most heavily in its Petition — *Vermont Agency of Natural Res. v. United States ex rel. Stevens*, 529 U.S. 765 (2000); *Steel Co. v. Citizens for*

a Better Env't, 523 U.S. 83 (1998), and *Merritt v. Shuttle, Inc.*, 187 F.3d 263 (2d Cir. 1999) — in any of its briefs in the Ninth Circuit. Aurora first cited *Vermont Agency* six days before oral argument in a letter stating that it had just learned of the then two-year old decision. Aurora first cited *Merritt* at oral argument, stating that its counsel had "discovered" the case the weekend before oral argument even though it had been decided almost four years earlier. Aurora never cited *Steel Co.* until it filed its Petition for Rehearing.

Perhaps due to Aurora's belated citation to these authorities, the Ninth Circuit's memorandum addressed Aurora's standing argument only in a footnote. Pet. App. 3a n.1. The Court first noted, implicitly adopting the District Court's detailed analysis, that "standing is potentially quite fact-dependent in this case and can be adequately addressed after a final decision is entered." *Id.* The Court rejected Aurora's argument that it had pendent appellate jurisdiction over the standing issue, taking guidance from this Court's decision in *Swint v. Chambers County Commission*, 514 U.S. 35, 50-51 (1995). *Id.* On the merits of Aurora's immunity appeal, the Court affirmed the District Court's decision that the litigation privilege did not immunize defendants from liability for their falsehoods. Pet. App. 4a.

The Ninth Circuit's memorandum was not published. *See* Pet. App. 2a n.*. Pursuant to a Ninth Circuit local rule, such an unpublished memorandum is "not binding precedent" and "may not be cited to or by the courts" within the Ninth Circuit. *See* Ninth Circuit Rule 36-3(a)-(b).[6]

6. Exceptions in the rule permit citation to an unpublished disposition in very limited circumstances: (1) when relevant for purposes of the doctrines of law of the case, res judicata or collateral estoppel, (2) to "show double jeopardy, sanctionable conduct, notice, (Cont'd)

Aurora then filed a Petition for Rehearing in the Ninth Circuit, arguing the procedural issue it raises in its Petition for Writ of Certiorari. The Court denied the Petition for Rehearing without opinion. Pet. App. 58a-59a.

Finally, Aurora again chose not to pursue the issue of standing in the District Court with the benefit of a full factual record. Instead, Aurora filed its Petition for Writ of Certiorari.

REASONS FOR DENYING THE PETITION

There are no "compelling reasons" under this Court's Rule 10 to grant certiorari here.

First, review of a footnote in an unpublished memorandum to test Aurora's claim of a procedural error would serve no purpose because Sierra unquestionably has standing. Sierra is unaware of any decision of this Court, or any other, denying standing to a plaintiff in a tort action like this one. Moreover, in contrast to Aurora's cited cases, including this Court's decision in *Vermont Agency*, Aurora's challenge to Sierra's standing raises factual issues that must be resolved by a trier of fact, not by this Court in the first instance. Indeed, the District Court has already determined that Sierra's allegations are sufficient to withstand a standing challenge at the pleading stage, and that any further challenge will require resolution of issues of fact.

Second, the Petition arises from an interlocutory appeal rather than a final judgment. That alone is a sufficient reason to

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(Cont'd)
entitlement to attorneys' fees, or the existence of a related case," or (3) in a request for publication or in a petition for rehearing. Ninth Circuit Rule 36-3(b). None applies to the unpublished memorandum in this case.

deny review. Discovery is nearing completion in the District Court, and Aurora will be free to test Sierra's standing on that factual record. The Court should wait for a final judgment (if there is one) and a full factual record, by which time the issue presented in Aurora's Petition may well be rendered moot.

Third, Aurora's effort to justify review based on a conflict among the lower courts evaporates under closer examination. The unpublished decision below is of no precedential value; it is of no interest to anyone other than the parties in this litigation. It raises no broader issue that deserves this Court's attention.

Aurora's Petition for Writ of Certiorari should be denied.

I. As The District Court Held, Sierra Has Alleged Facts Sufficient To Confer Standing To Sue And Any Further Challenge To Its Standing Turns On The Resolution Of Disputed Facts.

Aurora's Petition accuses the Ninth Circuit of having rendered an advisory opinion (Pet. 19), but that would only be true if, on the merits of the issue, Sierra lacked standing to sue. But Aurora cites no case in which this Court, or any other court, has held that a party like Sierra lacks standing to bring suit. Nor has Sierra identified any such case. Sierra unquestionably has standing, making review of the procedural issue raised by Aurora an academic exercise unworthy of this Court's attention.

A striking fact about this Court's treatment of the issue of standing is that it rarely addresses it. For example, in this Court's 2001 Term, only four cases addressed the question of Article III standing. *Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Mineta*, 534 U.S. 103 (2001); *Devlin v. Scardelletti*, 536 U.S. 1 (2002); *Utah v. Evans*, 536 U.S. 452 (2002); *Bd. of Educ. of Indep. Sch. Dist.*

No. 92 of Pottawatomie County v. Earls, 536 U.S. 822 (2002). Thus, in the vast majority of cases, this Court is silent on the issue of standing.

In practice, this Court appears to address standing only when it perceives a "standing *problem*." Robert L. Stern et al., *Supreme Court Practice* 812 (8th ed. 2002) (emphasis added). If there is no apparent "problem" with the plaintiff's standing then the issue is not addressed. In *Sell v. United States*, 123 S. Ct. 2174 (2003), for example, this Court granted review of an interlocutory appeal and reached the merits without ever mentioning whether or not the plaintiff had standing to sue. In a dissenting opinion joined by Justices O'Connor and Thomas, Justice Scalia wrote that "there may be no jurisdiction because, at the time this suit was filed, petitioner failed to meet the 'remediability' requirement of Article III standing. The Court of Appeals should address this jurisdictional issue on remand." *Id.* at 2188 n.3 (internal citations omitted). This Court's failure to address the issue of standing in *Sell* suggests that a Court of Appeals commits no error if it refuses to address a standing argument raised by a party if a majority of the judges hearing the case see no merit to the argument. Moreover, Justice Scalia's statement that the issue of standing should be resolved by the lower court, rather than by the Supreme Court in the first instance, confirms that the Ninth Circuit did nothing wrong in accepting the District Court's preliminary finding of standing and leaving Aurora to litigate the issue further in the District Court after remand.

The reason standing is so rarely addressed in this Court's opinions presumably stems from the fact that in most cases the plaintiff's standing is self-evident:

> The law of standing is almost exclusively concerned with such public-law questions as determinations of

> constitutionality and review of administrative or other governmental action. In theory, of course, it is not so limited. *The person suing for breach of contract or for a tort must satisfy the court that he or she is the real party in interest, but in practice such suits are brought only by a person harmed by the supposed wrong, and standing to sue is self-evident.*"

Robert L. Stern et al., *Supreme Court Practice* 810 n.2 (8th ed. 2002) (quoting C. Wright, *Law of Federal Courts* 68 (5th ed. 1994)) (emphasis added).

Thus, in *Bantam Books, Inc. v. Sullivan*, 372 U.S. 58, 64 n.6 (1963), this Court assessed the issue of standing and stated that a private action for the business tort of interference with advantageous business relations is "*plainly justiciable.*" (emphasis added). Similarly, in *Devlin v. Scardelletti*, 536 U.S. 1, 6-7 (2002), a challenge to a class action settlement, this Court rejected a challenge to plaintiff's standing in a single sentence: "As a member of the retiree class, petitioner has an interest in the settlement that creates a 'case or controversy' sufficient to satisfy the constitutional requirements of injury, causation, and redressability." (citations omitted).

Moreover, this Court routinely reaches the merits of cases involving business torts, including claims for tortious interference, without ever mentioning whether or not the plaintiff had standing under Article III. *See, e.g., Ruhrgas AG v. Marathon Oil Co.*, 526 U.S. 574, 579 (1999) (plaintiff's claims included state law claim for tortious interference with business relations); *Haddle v. Garrison*, 525 U.S. 121, 126 (1998) (claim alleged "merely a species of the traditional torts of intentional interference with contractual relations and intentional interference with prospective

contractual relations"); *Amer. Tel. & Tel. Co. v. Cent. Office Tel., Inc.*, 524 U.S. 214 (1998) (plaintiff included claim for tortious interference with contract).

Sierra's standing is likewise self-evident under the minimal requirements of Article III. A plaintiff need only allege that it "has suffered 'injury in fact,' that the injury is 'fairly traceable' to the actions of the defendant, and that the injury will likely be redressed by a favorable decision." *Bennett v. Spear*, 520 U.S. 154, 162 (1997) (citations omitted).[7] Sierra has suffered "injury in fact" — defined by this Court as "an invasion of a judicially cognizable interest which is (a) concrete and particularized and (b) actual or imminent, not conjectural or hypothetical," *Bennett*, 520 U.S. at 167 — its bid for ownership of ELIC was not selected and it suffered an injury to the business expectancy protected by California law. Sierra's injury is "fairly traceable" to defendants because Sierra's bid would have been accepted but for defendants' concealment of their knowing violations of state and federal law, illegal actions that would have precluded the Commissioner from selecting defendants' bid. Finally, the money damages sought for the intentional interference would redress Sierra's injury. Therefore, on the facts Sierra alleged, there is no question that Sierra has standing under this Court's test for Article III standing.

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7. Moreover, this Court has underscored that "at the pleading stage, general factual allegations of injury resulting from the defendant's conduct may suffice, for on a motion to dismiss we 'presume that general allegations embrace those specific facts that are necessary to support the claim.'" *Bennett*, 520 U.S. at 168 (citations omitted); *Warth v. Seldin*, 422 U.S. 490, 501 (1975) ("For purposes of ruling on a motion to dismiss for want of standing, both the trial and reviewing courts must accept as true all material allegations of the complaint, and must construe the complaint in favor of the complaining party.").

That conclusion is confirmed by the unanimity in the Courts of Appeals that a bidder in a bidding contest thwarted by the illegal actions of the winner has standing to sue. *See, e.g., Iconco v. Jensen Constr. Co.*, 622 F.2d 1291, 1301 (8th Cir. 1980) (affirming judgment for second place bidder); *Bieter Co. v. Bloomquist*, 987 F.2d 1319, 1328-29 (8th Cir. 1993) (losing bidder had standing to bring action against winning bidder who bribed awarding authority, even though plaintiff's proposal would have required further governmental approval); *Envtl. Techtonics v. W.S. Kirkpatrick, Inc.*, 847 F.2d 1052, 1067 (3d Cir. 1988) (unsuccessful bidder had standing to bring claim against competitor who obtained government contract by wrongful actions); *Terminate Control Corp. v. Horowitz*, 28 F.3d 1335, 1343 (2d Cir. 1994) (unsuccessful bidder for a public works contract as a result of the winning bidder's kickbacks had standing to bring a RICO claim even though state law specifically provided that an unsuccessful bidder had no property interest in a public works contract).

Aurora's argument that Sierra cannot establish an "injury in fact" is based on a single decision by an intermediate California appellate court, *In Re Pacific Standard Life Ins. Co.*, 9 Cal. App. 4th 1197 (1992). *See* Pet. at 20-21. But *Pacific Standard* does not help Aurora. Indeed, it holds that claims like Sierra's are permitted.

In *Pacific Standard* an unsuccessful bidder for an asset of an insolvent insurer sought to appeal from a judgment affirming the Insurance Commissioner's decision to sell it to a rival bidder. It claimed a right of appeal under California Code of Civil Procedure § 902, as a "party aggrieved" by the Commissioner's action. *Pacific Standard*, 9 Cal. App. 4th at 1200.

The Court of Appeal rejected the attempted appeal, holding that the plaintiff was not "aggrieved" by the Commissioner's decision since it had no "cognizable interest" in that decision. *Id.* at 1203. The reason it had no "cognizable interest" in the decision, and hence was not "aggrieved," the Court explained, was that the Commissioner's decision, and the confirming order of the Conservation Court, had "*no* res judicata effect" on any claim the plaintiff might have against the winning bidder for "tortious interference with [its] purported contract" with the Commissioner. *Id.* at 1202-03 (emphasis added).

Thus, the plaintiff in *Pacific Standard* was denied standing to appeal the Commissioner's decision precisely because that decision did *not* impair its ability to sue the winning bidder for tortious interference, as Sierra has done.

The Court of Appeal further explained that the issue before the Rehabilitation Court was simply the "prescription of terms for and authorization of the sale," and therefore its ruling approving the sale "*had no bearing*" on "the validity of [plaintiff's] claim [that defendant] . . . tortiously interfered with its purported contract . . . ." *Id.* at 1203 (emphasis added). It was for that reason that plaintiff was not "aggrieved" by that ruling and had no right of appeal.

Pacific Standard thus establishes the exact opposite of the proposition for which Aurora cites it.

Sierra is not appealing the Commissioner's decision to award ELIC to defendants and, under *Pacific Standard*, could not have done so. Rather, it is suing defendants for tortiously interfering with its reasonable expectation that, but for their wrongdoing, it would have been awarded the bid — the very claim that *Pacific Standard* found unaffected by the Commissioner's decision or the rulings of the Rehabilitation Court.

Indeed, at oral argument in the Ninth Circuit, counsel for the Commissioner argued this point on Sierra's behalf. He stated:

> I must say to you, because the Commissioner was a party in the *Pacific Standard Life* case, that it has been badly mischaracterized in the briefs filed by the defendants-appellants. It is not a case which stands for any proposition other than that a disappointed bidder does not have standing to appeal the award of the bid . . . And, in fact, on the facts of the case, there was a companion case that's referred to in the opinion itself twice, which was a tortious interference case. And the court in *In Re Pacific Standard Life* said, our holding on standing to appeal has nothing to do with the disappointed bidder, although albeit in a slightly different context, the same person, suing for tortious interference.

Finally, shortly after oral argument in the Ninth Circuit, the California Supreme Court decided *Korea Supply Co. v. Lockheed Martin Corp.*, 29 Cal. 4th 1134 (2003), which confirmed that a party in Sierra's position has standing to bring a claim for intentional interference under California law, the law applicable to Sierra's claim. The plaintiff in *Korea Supply* was a broker who sued to recover the commission it alleged it would have earned from its principal, an unsuccessful bidder, who lost the contract due to illegal behavior by the winning bidder. *Id.* at 1140. Sierra's standing to bring a claim under the same tort theory is an *a fortiori* case; Sierra was itself the runner-up winner in the bidding, rather than a broker suing to recover money it would have obtained from its principal had the principal prevailed in the bidding for a government contract.

Sierra's standing to sue is easily confirmed by those authorities. Recognizing this, Aurora has consistently sought to contest Sierra's allegations by relying on material obtained through discovery and not appearing in Sierra's Complaint. The District Court refused to consider this material because Aurora was moving to dismiss Sierra's Complaint rather than for summary judgment. Pet. App. 41a. The District Court explained that Aurora's challenge to Sierra's standing, based as it was on evidence outside the Complaint, was premature because "too many facts and inferences are disputed. The issues require full briefings, such as on motions for summary judgment." *Id.*

Aurora continued that effort in its interlocutory appeal, submitting hundreds of pages of evidence to the Court of Appeal. C.A. App. 32-52, 88-127, 301-472, 621-71; Supp. CA. App. 1-161. It was thus not surprising that the Ninth Circuit declined to address the merits of Aurora's argument and instead noted that its argument is "potentially quite fact-dependent." Pet. App. 3a n.1.

Sierra has standing. To grant review on the procedural question raised in Aurora's Petition would serve no purpose on the merits, because this Court (or the Ninth Circuit, if compelled to reach the merits) would quickly find, as did the District Court, that Sierra has adequately alleged standing. Any further challenge to Sierra's standing would turn on disputed facts that can be resolved only by a trier of fact, not by this Court or the Ninth Circuit.

II. This Case Is Not Ripe For Review.

Where a Court of Appeals remands a case for further proceedings, "it is not yet ripe for review by this Court." *Bhd. of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, et al. v. Bangor & Aroostook R.R. Co., et al.*, 389 U.S. 327, 328 (1967) (denying petition for writ of certiorari where court of appeals ruled on various legal issues and remanded case to district court for further consideration). The reason for this rule is that "many orders made in the progress of a suit become quite unimportant by reason of the final result, or of intervening matters." *Amer. Constr. Co. v. Jacksonville, T. & K. W. Ry. Co.*, 148 U.S. 372, 384 (1893) ("This court should not issue a writ of certiorari to review a decree of the Circuit Court of Appeals on appeal from an interlocutory order, unless it is necessary to prevent extraordinary inconvenience and embarrassment in the conduct of the cause."). Instead, this Court "generally await[s] final judgment in the lower courts before exercising our certiorari jurisdiction." *Va. Military Inst., et al., v. United States*, 508 U.S. 946 (1993) (denying petition for writ of certiorari) (Scalia, J., concurring).[8]

Aurora's Petition is premature and should be denied. The Ninth Circuit's decision on Aurora's interlocutory appeal remanded the case to the District Court for further proceedings. Discovery has continued in the District Court throughout the pendency of Aurora's interlocutory appeal to the present day. Aurora has been and remains free to move for summary judgment to challenge Sierra's standing or to raise the issue at trial. Sierra's standing can thus be tested on a full record in the District Court, with complete appellate review of any final judgment.

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8. This Court ultimately granted review in this case following entry of final judgment in the lower courts. *See United States v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515 (1996).

Aurora contends that the Ninth Circuit's decision will forever evade review unless this Court grants review now. Pet. App. 22. Aurora is wrong. If this case proceeds to a final judgment (and, unlike most civil cases, is not settled or otherwise resolved before judgment), then Aurora can challenge Sierra's standing in an appeal from the final judgment. In that hypothetical future appeal Aurora could present all of its standing arguments to the Ninth Circuit based on a full factual record.

If the Ninth Circuit addresses the merits of Aurora's standing arguments, then the procedural question — the only question raised in Aurora's Petition — will be moot. On the other hand, in the highly unlikely event that the Ninth Circuit refused to consider the merits of Aurora's standing arguments, Aurora's procedural issue would then be ripe for certiorari review on a full record.

Waiting for a final judgment for appellate review of the District Court's holding that Sierra has standing to sue is wholly consistent with the general rule that interlocutory review is never available to a party who unsuccessfully challenges a plaintiff's standing. *See Catlin v. United States*, 324 U.S. 229, 236 (1945) ("[D]enial of a motion to dismiss, even when the motion is based upon jurisdictional grounds, is not immediately reviewable."). This Court has no reason to review this case now and every reason to wait for a final judgment.

III. The Unpublished Decision Below Creates No Conflict, Much Less One Sufficient To Justify Review.

Aurora argues that a statement in a footnote in the Ninth Circuit's unpublished memorandum contravenes this Court's decision in *Vermont Agency of Natural Resources v. United States ex rel. Stevens*, 529 U.S. 765, 771 (2000). Pet. 7-11. In *Vermont Agency*, this Court addressed the issue of whether

the plaintiff, a private person suing in the name of the United States as a *qui tam* relator, had standing to bring a claim under the Federal False Claims Act. This Court held that the plaintiff there had standing, a matter it was able to resolve as a matter of law without having to resolve any issues of fact. *Id.* at 768-78. This Court apparently raised the issue because it perceived a significant question of law as to the plaintiff's standing. As the Ninth Circuit explained, *Vermont Agency* did not hold that a Court of Appeals must address the merits of the plaintiff's standing in every interlocutory appeal. Pet. App. 3a n.1. Indeed, as discussed above, this Court rarely addresses standing, and has even declined to address it where three dissenting Justices contend that a plaintiff lacks standing. *See* p. 10, above.

Even if the footnote in the Ninth Circuit's unpublished memorandum disposition were somehow inconsistent with *Vermont Agency*, however, this Court does not sit simply to correct errors by lower courts. *See Ross v. Moffitt*, 417 U.S. 600, 616-17 (1974) ("This Court's review . . . is discretionary and depends on numerous factors other than the perceived correctness of the judgment we are asked to review."); *Magnum Import Co. v. Coty*, 262 U.S. 159, 163 (1923) ("The jurisdiction [of the Supreme Court to review cases by way of certiorari] was not conferred upon this Court merely to give the defeated party in the Circuit Court of Appeals another hearing."); Robert L. Stern et al., *Supreme Court Practice* 255 (8th ed. 2002) ("[T]he Court generally will not grant certiorari just because the decision below may be erroneous.").

Aurora's second argument is that the unpublished memorandum conflicts with published opinions of the Second and Tenth Circuits: *Merritt v. Shuttle, Inc.*, 187 F.3d 263, 269 (2d Cir. 1999) and *Timpanogos Tribe v. Conway*, 286 F.3d 1195, 1201 (10th Cir. 2002). However, the unpublished

memorandum, under the Ninth Circuit's rules, is "not binding precedent" and "may not be cited to or by the courts" within the Ninth Circuit. *See* Ninth Circuit Rule 36-3(a)-(b). Given that the memorandum is of no precedential value within the Ninth Circuit, any perceived conflict with *Merritt* or *Timpanogos Tribe* is wholly theoretical. The memorandum is of no interest to anyone other than Aurora and Sierra.[9]

Nor does the unpublished memorandum suggest a risk of "unchecked issuance of advisory opinions by the Ninth Circuit." Pet. 19. The Ninth Circuit's recent *published* cases confirm that it addresses issues of Article III jurisdiction when appropriate. *Meredith v. Oregon*, 321 F.3d 807, 816 (9th Cir. 2003) ("Resolution of [the Court's Article III] subject matter jurisdiction" was necessary "because if appellate courts lack jurisdiction, they cannot review the merits of these properly appealed rulings."); *Kyocera Corp. v. Prudential-Bache Trade Services, Inc.*, 2003 WL 22025130, __ F.3d __ n.12 (9th Cir. Aug. 29, 2003) (en banc) (stating that in "cases in which jurisdictional questions may exist, we are required to resolve those questions first," and citing *Steel Co. v. Citizens for a Better Env't*, 523 U.S. 83 (1998) for proposition that it "requir[es] that a court first address its own jurisdiction before deciding a case on the merits.").[10]

9. Aurora claims that this Court "routinely" grants review of unpublished decisions (Pet. 22), but its citation to three cases from 2001 and one case from 2000 proves that it is the rare exception rather than the rule.

10. Aurora's claimed "conflict" is a fiction given that *Meredith* is consistent with Aurora's interpretation of *Vermont Agency*, as well as *Merritt* and *Timpanogos Tribe*. As a *published* opinion, future litigants in the Ninth Circuit and elsewhere can cite *Meredith* as authority. *Meredith* itself cites *Merritt* and *Timpanogos Tribe* with

(Cont'd)

Aurora also attempts to demonstrate the existence of a conflict by citing a pair of Eleventh Circuit cases — *Moniz v. City of Fort Lauderdale*, 145 F.3d 1278, 1281 n.3 (11th Cir. 1998) and *Summit Med. Assocs., P.C. v. Pryor*, 180 F.3d 1326, 1334-36 (11th Cir. 1999) — both of which declined to address a standing argument in the context of an interlocutory appeal. Pet. 11 & 13-14. Both cases were decided before *Vermont Agency*, *Merritt* and *Timpanogos Tribe*, and the most recent of the cases — which is itself four years old — simply followed *Moniz*. The Eleventh Circuit might well reach a different result if it were to face the question in the future. There is no current conflict that is ripe for review.

Finally, Aurora argues that the "conflict is deeper" because courts have held in the context of other forms of interlocutory appeals that Article III jurisdiction issues must always be addressed at the threshold. Pet. 8 & 16-18. Aurora has it backwards: those cases reveal *unanimity* in the Courts of Appeals, not any conflict that requires this Court's attention.

* * * * *

There is no need for this Court to review a footnote in an unpublished decision addressing an issue which, as a pleading matter, reflected no error and which remains open for a decision on a full factual record either by motion or at trial. Nor is there any conflict in the lower courts that would justify review.

(Cont'd)

approval. *Meredith*, 321 F.3d at 813, 816. Furthermore, *Meredith* is binding on all future panels of the Ninth Circuit. *Hart v. Massanari*, 266 F.3d 1155, 1171-72 (9th Cir. 2001). The unpublished memorandum below, by contrast, cannot be cited by or to any court in the Ninth Circuit and thus is not a precedent on which any future litigant or court can rely.

CONCLUSION

Sierra respectfully requests that the Court deny Aurora's Petition for Writ of Certiorari.

Respectfully submitted,

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No. 03-187

IN THE

Supreme Court of the United States

AURORA NATIONAL LIFE ASSURANCE COMPANY AND NEW CALIFORNIA LIFE HOLDINGS, INC.,

Petitioners,

v.

SIERRA NATIONAL INSURANCE HOLDINGS, INC. AND GEORGIA LEE, AS RECEIVER FOR SIERRA NATIONAL INSURANCE HOLDINGS, INC.,

Respondents.

On Petition for a Writ of Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit

REPLY BRIEF OF PETITIONER

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TABLE OF AUTHORITIES	ii
REPLY BRIEF OF PETITIONER	1
CONCLUSION	10

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

CASES Page

California ex rel. RoNo, LLC v. *Altus Fin. S.A.*, No. 02-56038, 2003 WL 22119896 (9th Cir. Sept. 15, 2003) 9
FEA v. *Algonquin SNG, Inc.*, 426 U.S. 548 (1976) 6
FEC v. *NRA Political Victory Fund*, 513 U.S. 88 (1994) 5
Granfinanciera, S.A. v. *Nordberg*, 492 U.S. 33 (1989) 6
Green Tree Fin. Corp. – Ala. v. *Randolph*, 531 U.S. 79 (2000) 6
Korea Supply Co. v. *Lockheed Martin Corp.*, 63 P.3d 937 (Cal. 2003) 9
Kyocera Corp. v. *Prudential-Bache Trade Services, Inc.*, Nos. 01-15630 et al., 2003 WL 22025130 (9th Cir. Aug. 29, 2003) 2
Meredith v. *Oregon*, 321 F.3d 807 (9th Cir. 2003) 2
Merritt v. *Shuttle, Inc.*, 187 F.3d 263 (2d Cir. 1999) 1
Moniz v. *City of Fort Lauderdale*, 145 F.3d 1278 (11th Cir. 1998) 2
In re Pacific Standard Life Ins. Co., 12 Cal. Rptr. 2d 50 (Cal. Ct. App. 1992) 7, 8
Roberts v. *Galen of Va., Inc.*, 525 U.S. 249 (1999) 6
Sell v. *United States*, 123 S. Ct. 2174 (2003) 5
Steel Co. v. *Citizens for a Better Env't*, 523 U.S. 83 (1998) 4
Summit Med. Assocs., P.C. v. *Pryor*, 180 F.3d 1326 (11th Cir. 1999) 2
Swint v. *Chambers County Comm'n*, 514 U.S. 35 (1995) 1

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES – continued

Page

Timpanogos Tribe v. *Conway*, 286 F.3d 1195 (10th Cir. 2002) 1

Trans World Airlines, Inc. v. *Thurston*, 469 U.S. 111 (1985) 6

Vermont Agency of Natural Res. v. *United States ex rel. Stevens*, 529 U.S. 765 (2000) 4

Will v. *Michigan Dep't of State Police*, 491 U.S. 58 (1989) 5

Younger v. *Harris*, 401 U.S. 37 (1971) 3

STATUTES

28 U.S.C. § 1292 3

Cal. Ins. Code § 1037 9

RULES

Sup. Ct. Rule 10(a) 4

Fed. R. App. P. 28(j) 3

SCHOLARLY AUTHORITY

Robert L. Stern et al., *Supreme Court Practice* (8th ed. 2002) 1, 5, 6

REPLY BRIEF OF PETITIONER

Respondent attempts to trivialize the issue presented in the petition by characterizing it as a "claim of procedural error." Opp. 8. The issue in this case is one of constitutional dimension: whether the Ninth Circuit exceeded its judicial power by reaching the substantive issues in a proper collateral order appeal while expressly refusing to address a challenge to its Article III jurisdiction. This Court frequently grants certiorari to resolve conflicts concerning the Article III limits on the powers of federal courts. Robert L. Stern et al., *Supreme Court Practice* 252-54 (8th ed. 2002) (citing cases).

Respondent does not dispute that the Ninth Circuit's express refusal in this case to fulfill its Article III obligation in a proper collateral order appeal conflicts with decisions of the Second and Tenth Circuits. Respondent's four arguments that this recurring and important conflict does not warrant this Court's review are without merit.[1]

1. Sierra does not even attempt to refute that the panel's decision below squarely conflicts with the holdings of *Merritt* v. *Shuttle, Inc.*, 187 F.3d 263, 269 (2d Cir. 1999), and *Timpanogos Tribe* v. *Conway*, 286 F.3d 1195, 1201 (10th Cir. 2002). Indeed, Sierra concedes that the panel below expressly rejected Aurora's argument that the court had pendent appellate jurisdiction over standing issues under *Swint* v. *Chambers County Commission*, 514 U.S. 35 (1995). Opp. 7. The panel's interpretation of *Swint* directly contradicts *Merritt* and *Timpanogos Tribe*. See Pet. 11-13.

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[1] Sierra makes a point of emphasizing – twice – that two other defendants in this case have been indicted on federal criminal charges. Opp. 1, 6. The only defendants who have appealed or petitioned this Court, however, are Aurora, a California insurance company that continues to provide over $5 billion in coverage to policyholders, and New California, Aurora's parent. Aurora and New California have *not* been indicted.

Instead, Sierra contends that the undisputed conflict is unworthy of this Court's review because the panel's decision is unpublished. Opp. 20. If that were correct, however, then this Court would never grant certiorari with respect to unpublished decisions that involve circuit conflicts, which it plainly does. See Pet. 22-23 (citing grants of certiorari to review unpublished decisions).

Sierra simply ignores that the petition's question presented sets forth a fundamental issue of federal court power that five circuits (the Second, Sixth, Ninth, Tenth, and Eleventh circuits) have addressed with expressly conflicting results in six decisions from 1996 through 2003. See Pet. 11-14 & n.8.[2] This recurring conflict over an issue of fundamental importance to appellate review warrants review by this Court.

Sierra also asks this Court to ignore the conflict because "[t]he Ninth Circuit's recent *published* cases confirm that it addresses issues of Article III jurisdiction *when appropriate*." Opp. 20 & n.10 (second emphasis added) (citing *Meredith* v. *Oregon*, 321 F.3d 807, 816 (9th Cir. 2003), and *Kyocera Corp.* v. *Prudential-Bache Trade Services, Inc.*, Nos. 01-15630 et al., 2003 WL 22025130, at n.12 (9th Cir. Aug. 29, 2003) (en banc)). Respondent's very characterization shows that the Ninth Circuit's approach is discretionary – reviewing

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[2] Sierra weakly suggests that the Eleventh Circuit, which (like the Ninth Circuit here) has refused to address Article III jurisdiction as a threshold matter on proper collateral orders appeals, "might well reach a different result if it were to face the question in the future." Opp. 21; *see* Pet. 13-14 (discussing *Moniz* v. *City of Fort Lauderdale*, 145 F.3d 1278, 1281 n.3 (11th Cir. 1998), and *Summit Med. Assocs., P.C.* v. *Pryor*, 180 F.3d 1326, 1334-36 (11th Cir. 1999)). This contradicts *Summit*, where the court expressly declined to reexamine the issue, noting that the question was "governed" by its "unambiguous precedent" in *Moniz*. *Summit*, 180 F.3d at 1335-36. Moreover, Sierra's contention makes no sense because the only basis for the Eleventh Circuit to reconsider its position would be *Vermont Agency*. But Sierra's view of *Vermont Agency* is that it does not foreclose a circuit court from treating Article III jurisdiction issues in interlocutory appeals as discretionary.

Article III jurisdiction only "when appropriate" – in conflict with the mandatory approach followed in the Second and Tenth Circuits.

Neither Ninth Circuit decision cited by Sierra supports the proposition that the Ninth Circuit recognizes an *obligation* to address Article III jurisdiction issues in proper collateral order appeals. *Kyocera* was not an interlocutory appeal and, indeed, did not involve any jurisdictional issues.

Meredith cannot support Sierra's proposition because petitioners twice brought it to the attention of the Ninth Circuit in this case (in a letter pursuant to Fed. R. App. P. 28(j) and in their petition for rehearing and suggestion for rehearing en banc, see Pet. 17 n.10), but that court nevertheless refused to address the Article III standing issue in this case. Instead, the Ninth Circuit specifically held that it is "discretionary" whether a court of appeals must resolve a question of Article III jurisdiction in a proper collateral order appeal. Pet. App. 3a n.1. Moreover, the language in *Meredith* concerning Article III is *dicta* because that case did not involve a collateral order appeal and did not involve standing. *Meredith* involved an interlocutory appeal of a preliminary injunction granted by the district court, and the panel in that case held that in addition to resolving the merits of the preliminary injunction, it also would resolve whether the district court should have abstained under *Younger* v. *Harris*, 401 U.S. 37 (1971).

Ultimately, Sierra acknowledges, as it must, that the courts of appeals have held almost unanimously that Article III jurisdiction issues must be addressed at the threshold of all kinds of interlocutory appeals, including 28 U.S.C. § 1292(a) appeals of injunction orders and § 1292(b) certifications. Opp. 21; see Pet. 16-19. Sierra contends that the panel's contrary opinion does not warrant this Court's review because of the "*unanimity*" in the federal courts. Opp. 21 (emphasis in original). Quite the opposite, however, such unanimity demonstrates that the panel's decision was plainly erroneous

and should be summarily reversed, or at least that review should be granted. See Sup. Ct. Rule 10(a) (a ground for granting a petition for certiorari is that a court of appeals "has so far departed from the accepted and usual course of judicial proceedings . . . as to call for an exercise of this Court's supervisory power"); accord Stern, *supra* at 252-53.

2. Sierra argues that the panel's decision does not conflict with *Vermont Agency of Natural Resources* v. *United States ex rel. Stevens*, 529 U.S. 765, 771 (2000). Opp. 18-19. Sierra's argument is unavailing.

Sierra asserts that "*Vermont Agency* did not hold that a Court of Appeals *must* address the merits of the plaintiff's standing in every interlocutory appeal." Opp. 19 (emphasis added) (citing Pet. App. 3a n.1). Sierra, however, fails to address, much less refute, petitioners' analysis demonstrating that this Court in *Vermont Agency* left no doubt that a federal appellate court's mandatory obligation to examine Article III jurisdiction applies to a proper collateral order appeal. Pet. 8-11. Specifically, in the *Vermont Agency* opinion, 529 U.S. at 771, this Court cited its decision in *Steel Co.* v. *Citizens for a Better Env't*, 523 U.S. 83, 93-102 (1998), in support of its threshold examination of standing on a collateral order appeal. In *Steel Co.*, this Court held that a federal appellate court has a duty to examine its Article III jurisdiction "*without exception*" on "*every* writ of error or appeal," and that this duty is imposed by Article III. 523 U.S. at 94-95 (emphases added). This Court's reliance on *Steel Co.* demonstrates that *Vermont Agency* can only mean that federal appellate courts have an unflagging obligation to examine their Article III jurisdiction on proper collateral order appeals, just as they do on all other writs and appeals.

Alternatively, Sierra asserts that any inconsistency between the panel's decision below and *Vermont Agency* does not warrant this Court's attention because "this Court does not sit simply to correct errors by lower courts." Opp. 19. This assertion overlooks the fact that lower court decisions that are

"clearly erroneous, particularly if there is a controlling Supreme Court precedent to the contrary," are classic candidates for summary reversal. Stern, *supra* at 316.

Sierra also contends that *Sell* v. *United States*, 123 S. Ct. 2174 (2003), "confirms" that the Ninth Circuit did not err in declining to address standing below. Opp. 10. *Sell* cannot carry the weight that Sierra attaches to it. *Sell* involved a collateral order appeal in which the majority did not address standing, but the dissent did exactly what petitioners argue must be done: it identified a potential issue with respect to the petitioner's Article III standing and stated that the court of appeals "should address this jurisdictional issue on remand." 123 S. Ct. at 2188 n.3 (citing *Steel Co.*). The majority did not disagree. The fact that the majority opinion of this Court did not address the standing issue hardly "confirms" the propriety of the Ninth Circuit's approach that a court of appeals has power to refuse to address an expressly-raised Article III jurisdictional issue in a proper collateral order appeal. As an initial matter, where a majority opinion of this Court does not address a jurisdictional issue, it is *not* precedent on that jurisdictional issue. *FEC* v. *NRA Political Victory Fund*, 513 U.S. 88, 97 (1994); *Will* v. *Michigan Dep't of State Police*, 491 U.S. 58, 63 n.4 (1989).

Moreover, the United States did not challenge the petitioner's standing in *Sell*. Accordingly, *Sell*, at most, implicitly supports the notion that this Court is not obligated to address standing issues *sua sponte*; it provides no support for the notion that courts of appeal may expressly refuse to decide standing challenges raised by the parties to a proper collateral order appeal, as occurred here. In any event, to the extent that there is any implicit tension between *Sell* and *Vermont Agency*, that provides all the more reason for the Court to grant the petition. Stern, *supra* at 234-35 (citing numerous instances in which certiorari has been granted in part to resolve tension between prior decisions of this Court).

3. Most of Sierra's response is an attempt to confuse the question presented by the petition. Opp. 9-16. The question presented is whether the Ninth Circuit erred in expressly ruling that Article III does not require a court of appeals to address standing. It is not the very different question, on which the Ninth Circuit refused to express an opinion, of whether Sierra has a legally cognizable interest under California law sufficient for standing.

If the Court takes certiorari over the question presented, it is unlikely even to address whether Sierra has standing. This is because this Court has discretion not to address an alternative ground for affirmance, especially when it was not addressed below. *Green Tree Fin. Corp. – Ala.* v. *Randolph*, 531 U.S. 79, 92 n.7 (2000) (declining to reach proposed alternative ground for affirmance because not decided below); *Roberts* v. *Galen of Va., Inc.*, 525 U.S. 249 (1999) (per curiam) (same).[3]

In any event, Sierra is wrong in both of its contradictory contentions that its standing turns on disputed facts and is "unquestionabl[e]." Opp. 9, 16. Sierra's standing is a pure legal question. As Sierra concedes, in order to allege Article III standing, Sierra must allege the violation of a "'judicially cognizable interest.'" Opp. 12 (quoting *Bennett* v. *Spear*, 520 U.S. 154, 167 (1997)). Sierra also concedes that because its

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[3] Moreover, Sierra's contention that it has standing might not qualify as an alternative ground for affirmance in this Court. This Court can only affirm on an alternative ground "so long as it does not change the judgment." Stern, *supra* at 444; *Granfinanciera, S.A.* v. *Nordberg*, 492 U.S. 33, 38-39 (1989). Here, the panel's judgment below was that it would not address standing. Pet. App. 3a n.1. A ruling that Sierra has standing – the ruling Sierra requests from this Court – arguably would alter or expand the judgment below. As a result, requesting such a ruling might have required a cross-petition, which Sierra did not file. *Trans World Airlines, Inc.* v. *Thurston*, 469 U.S. 111, 119 n.14 (1985) ("An argument that would modify the judgment . . . cannot be presented unless a cross-petition has been filed"); *FEA* v. *Algonquin SNG, Inc.*, 426 U.S. 548, 560 n.11 (1976) (same).

only remaining claim is for tortious interference under California law, it must allege violation of an interest cognizable under California law. *Id.*

The critical authority defining whether Sierra has a judicially cognizable interest in this context is *In re Pacific Standard Life Ins. Co.*, 12 Cal. Rptr. 2d 50 (Cal. Ct. App. 1992). Significantly, Sierra does not dispute that *Pacific Standard* held that a disappointed bidder in a California insurance conservation proceeding lacks standing to appeal, even if the losing bidder asserts tortious conduct by the winner. Opp. 14 ("Sierra is not appealing the Commissioner's decision to award ELIC to defendants and, under *Pacific Standard*, could not have done so."). Thus, the standing issue in this case is a purely legal one: whether the language and logic of *Pacific Standard* applies to standing to bring new lawsuits, or is limited to standing to appeal. That question of law does not turn on any factual issues. None of the continuing discovery on the substantive issues in this case, or the evidence presented at a trial, could possibly have any bearing on interpreting *Pacific Standard*.[4]

It is irrelevant to the question presented to this Court which side's interpretation of *Pacific Standard* is correct. Nonetheless, Sierra seeks to construe *dicta* in *Pacific Standard* to argue that "[t]he reason [the disappointed bidder] had no 'cognizable interest' in the decision . . . was that the Commissioner's decision, and the confirming order of the Conservation Court, had '*no* res judicata effect' on any claim the plaintiff might have against the winning bidder 'for tortious interference with [its] purported contract' with the Commissioner." Opp. 14 (quoting *Pacific Standard*). Sierra's argument ignores that *Pacific Standard*'s explanation

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[4] Sierra notes that Aurora relied on materials outside of the complaint in the District Court, Opp. 4-5, but Aurora used these materials to address the issues of immunity, causation, and damages, not the proper interpretation of *Pacific Standard*. Pet. App. 9a n.4, 40a-41a.

of why a disappointed bidder in an insurance conservation has "no legally cognizable interest" has nothing to do with res judicata.

The core holding of *Pacific Standard* is that the "requirement of judicial authorization and prescription of terms fatally attenuated *whatever interest, whether present or prospective*, [the disappointed bidder] claimed to have in the purchase of [the failed company]." 12 Cal. Rptr. 2d at 54 (emphasis added). Under *Pacific Standard*, Sierra's "interest *ended* with the court's authorization to sell [the insurance company] to another suitor." *Id.* at 55 (emphasis added). That rationale and language are just as applicable to a losing bidder's subsequent lawsuit – based on a "prospective interest" brought after any such "interest ended" – as they are to its appeal. *Pacific Standard* only discussed res judicata in order to reject the disappointed bidder's alternative argument that the Conservation Court had created standing by stating in dictum that the losing bidder would lose a lawsuit for "tortious interference." *Id.* at 54.

Ultimately, it would contradict any rational notion of public policy if disappointed bidders lacked standing to appeal but could bring collateral attacks years after the conservation against the new, rehabilitated insurance company. As part of a conservation, as in this case, most of the policyholders of the failed company become policyholders of the new, rehabilitated company. As in this case, none became policyholders of the losing bidder. Allowing the losing bidder to bring a potentially crippling lawsuit against the new company therefore could only injure the persons who became policyholders of the rehabilitated company – the very persons who are supposed to be protected by an insurance conservation.[5] For this reason, the National Organization of

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[5] Sierra attempts to spin certain comments at oral argument in the Ninth Circuit from outside litigation counsel for the Commissioner. Opp. 15. The Commissioner's *amicus* brief to the Ninth Circuit states: "[T]he

Life and Health Insurance Guaranty Associations – which guarantee insurance coverage for millions of policyholders in all 50 states – filed an *amicus* brief in the Ninth Circuit arguing that Sierra lacks standing. See *Amicus* Brief of National Organization Of Life And Health Insurance Guaranty Associations, at 5, Nos. 02-55193, 02-55259 (9th Cir. filed May 28, 2002) ("Sierra lacks any legally cognizable interest on which Sierra may base its claims in this case").[6]

Finally, Sierra is wrong in asserting that the decision in *Korea Supply Co.* v. *Lockheed Martin Corp.*, 63 P.3d 937 (Cal. 2003), "confirmed that a party in Sierra's position has standing to bring a claim for intentional interference under California law." Opp. 15. *Korea Supply* did not involve an insurance conservation and hence the court did not address either *Pacific Standard* or Cal. Ins. Code § 1037, the statute upon which *Pacific Standard* is based.[7]

4. Sierra argues that this case is "[n]ot [r]ipe [f]or [r]eview" because "Aurora can challenge Sierra's standing in

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Commissioner expresses no view on whether Sierra has standing to base its claims of injury on defendants' fraud against the Commissioner." *See Amicus* Brief Of Insurance Commissioner Of The State Of California, at 6, Nos. 02-55193, 02-55259 (9th Cir. filed July 22, 2002).

[6] In a related appeal, the Ninth Circuit certified questions of the standing of the California Attorney General to bring state-law civil claims for conservation-related alleged wrongs to the California Supreme Court as a matter of "comity," because the issues were undecided under California law, and because the policy issues implicated by such standing questions are "appropriately within the ken of the California Supreme Court." *California ex rel. RoNo, LLC v. Altus Fin. S.A.*, No. 02-56038, 2003 WL 22119896, at *5-*7 (9th Cir. Sept. 15, 2003). Similar concerns are present here. They suggest that, on a remand, Sierra's standing also would be certified to the California Supreme Court.

[7] Sierra also cites decisions from the federal courts of appeals holding that disappointed bidders in various types of transactions have standing to bring RICO and other claims. Opp. 13. None of these decisions, however, involved standing under California law, much less standing arising out of a California insurance conservation.

an appeal from the final judgment." Opp. 17-18. This argument is sophistry. The question presented by this petition is whether the Ninth Circuit exceeded its judicial power by refusing to address Article III jurisdiction *on a proper collateral order appeal*, *not* whether Sierra has standing. The Court can only review the question presented *now*, by granting review of the decision on the collateral order appeal itself. If the case proceeds to final judgment and there is an appeal of that judgment, this Court plainly could not entertain the by-then moot question whether the first panel was obligated to address Article III jurisdiction on the earlier collateral order appeal. Accordingly, the interlocutory posture of this case is essential to review by this Court of the recurring and important question presented by the petition.

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, and for the reasons stated in the petition for certiorari, the petition should be granted, or alternatively, this Court should summarily reverse the Ninth Circuit's decision.

Respectfully submitted,

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